

A Handful of Sand

Gurdial Singh

Translated from Hindi by
Ravi Nandan Sinha



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To my son Dipu

Preface

MIMETICALLY, *A Handful of Sand* takes for itself the province of the changing social landscape in post-Independence India. It is the story of Amar Singh, an ambitious young man, who moves to a big city in search of better opportunities. But in the process he has to leave his young wife behind, trapped in a small, lonely house. Gurdial Singh has narrated a very moving human story against the backdrop of the changing social face of India. The novel is also, and perhaps more so, the story of Soni, the young wife of Amar Singh, who has to face life alone when her husband embarks on his long journey to 'success'. The honesty, candour and poignancy that enliven the pages on which Soni appears will bring to the reader's mind images of women created by novelists like Thomas Hardy and Sharatchandra Chatterjee. Translating this great novel has been an immensely satisfying experience for me and, though my assignment is over now, I have not yet ceased to feel

the power, the passion and the poignancy of this rivetting story of a young Sikh boy and his lovely wife Soni.

There is a certain quality in Gurdial Singh's writing that is difficult to define but which is responsible for a natural magnificence in his narration. *A Handful of Sand* is a short novel, just over forty-thousand words, but after one has finished reading it, one has a feeling that it is a very rich novel capturing the slow movement of time, interweaving the story of two individuals with the larger world view of Sikhism that defines them, and offering an insight into the way India has changed. It is one of those short novels that have a big and long-lasting impact on the reader.

For the readers of Punjabi and Hindi novels Gurdial Singh does not need any introduction. He is a major voice in Indian literature having won the prestigious Jnanpith award besides the Sahitya Akademi award and many other honours. Given the Padmashri for his contribution to literature, he has written novels and short stories that are among the most precious that India has produced. Now with the translation of many of his novels and short stories into English, he is also not an entirely unknown name to the readers of literature in English language. Much has been said about the manner in which Gurdial Singh has redefined post-Independence Indian novel, how he has given a new direction to Punjabi literature and how he stands in the great tradition of Indian literature, which is one, though written in different languages. The quality in his writing that has appealed to me the most is the poetry in his fiction. In this novel there is magic realism, and the narrative, which

begins as a record of something happening in the neighbourhood, ends in the realm of dreams and desires. Throughout the novel, one feels the presence of a voice that is not only telling the story, but is also a voice that confronts us with an absolute mystical authority. I hope this translation of *A Handful of Sand* will offer enriching reading.

RAVI NANDAN SINHA

One

FOR three days in a row—and for hours together—she had been made to sit still on a stool, and she was getting bored with it. It was indeed silly: the husband asking his wife to sit for him like a statue, and then, without saying a word, painting her portrait for hours, and that too when their marriage was not even a week old. It was completely absurd, and she could make no sense of it.

“Now we’ll do it tomorrow; I am tired,” rising from the stool, Soni said, and without waiting for her husband’s permission, walked away into the other room.

Amar Singh said nothing, making only an unsuccessful attempt to smile. For a while he played with the still-wet colours, and then, apparently forgetting everything else, began to hum a song.

In the other room, gazing pensively at the painting of a woman hanging on the wall Soni lay tired on her bed. The painting showed a dark, large-eyed woman who

seemed to stare down at her. Feeling a bit disturbed, she sat on the bed, and had a sudden desire to look at her face in the mirror kept in the cupboard behind her. But too tired to get up, she lay down again. Now she was not looking at that horrible painting. Her eyes had become heavy with fatigue, and she found it difficult to keep them open. They were full of sleep and yet sleep would not come. Then she felt something brushing her forehead, and she got up with a start. Opening her eyes heavy with sleep, she saw Amar Singh sitting on the left-hand side of the bed and smiling at her.

"*Hai...hai*, you scared me!" rubbing her eyes with her fingers, she said with a touch of panic in her voice.

"Why? Who else but me will come here to kiss your forehead?," he said with a smile and with his right hand he began to stroke her forehead gently. His hands had gone rough with handling colours and brushes. Very lovingly, he arranged a lock of hair falling over her face.

Feeling as if thorns were piercing into her eyes, Soni rubbed them with her soft fingers. Smiling mischievously like a boy, Amar Singh watched her curvaceous body, and then with great affection, as if she were a statue, he began to run his fingers over her forehead, chin, and eyes. All those days, she had tried hard to understand the kind of man her husband was, but she could make nothing of him, and now even an effort to do so bored her. So, closing her eyes she lay down again. Then she felt something moving over her body and her limbs began to feel so heavy that she could not move them... At that moment Amar Singh appeared to be like a child sitting in her lap. Her

eyes grew heavy with sleep, and she could not keep them open.

It was the fourth night after their marriage. Then on the fifth, sixth, and also on the seventh night, asking her to wear the same clothes she had worn every night, Amar Singh seated her on a stool in his 'studio' and painted her portrait. Soni felt that if she herself had not put an end to those sessions he would probably have kept her sitting on that stool till the morning. Of course, she understood his enthusiasm, and tried to model for him as long as she could, but after some time, the pain in her waist would force her to get up. After sitting motionless in one position for two or three hours, she felt so tired that the moment she lay down on bed she would be fast asleep. She woke up the next morning only when the sun had climbed high in the sky.

Thus, one day followed the other, and ten days and an equal number of nights passed. On the eleventh day, the painting, with a gilded frame around it, was hung on the wall. When she saw the painting, Soni thought it was not she, but some *apsara* of *Indra's* court. Again and again, she looked at it and thought: was she really that beautiful?

Impressed with his own work, Amar Singh would sometimes stand five or ten paces away from the painting, and examine it with a critical eye. Then he would go close to it and study each line, each colour and its brightness, and admire his skill with the brush. With a smile playing on his lips, he sometimes moved far away into the courtyard and muttered something to himself, as if he were talking to someone else, but to whom he spoke, and what he said,

was something that perhaps he himself did not know.

Then a question crossed his mind: What did such beautiful art mean to Soni? But he could never ask her. He was rather bashful about coming close to her, or speaking to her, or even touching her. He was like a child, who is afraid of touching burning embers, but at the same time is not able to resist the temptation of its glowing beauty.

"Isn't it beautiful?," standing behind Soni and placing his hands on her shoulders he said in a low voice. Turning her face to him she pressed his hand against her cheek, which indeed seemed to glow like embers.

"Yes, it's very beautiful," she said, and leaning over backwards when she fixed her large gem-like eyes intently on his, he jerked away his right hand from her shoulder, as if a thorn had pierced it.

Soni looked at him with some surprise, but pulling his hand free he walked into the courtyard. Rolling his brown eyes, and pulling up his loose-fitting, and constantly slipping, trousers with his right elbow, he said, "This is called art...! For hundreds of kos from here, who can match Amar Singh? Do you understand what I am saying...? Let any man come here and challenge me! If anyone has the courage to do so, let him come and compete with me, but who can do that? All of them are like cats, who can act brave and mew only in their own houses, but do they have the courage to face me? No! Do you understand what I am saying?"

Soni saw a sparkle in his eyes she had never seen before. For a while, she listened to his child-like prattle; and then lowering herself on the bed, she rested her head against

the left bedpost. Soon, her limbs felt so heavy that she could not move them. Her eyes too were closed, but who could know whether she was sleeping or awake.

Two

IT was always past midnight when Amar Singh returned home. After coming back from school, he would take tea, and then leave immediately for giving tuitions to two girls. On his way back from there, he would stop at his friend Mitthu's shop. In the morning while leaving for school, he would carry with him his lunch-box, but Soni often wondered whether he really ate his lunch.

In the evening, when she had finished cooking, Soni waited for him till late in the night. Sometimes when she felt very tired, she lay down to rest for a while. Amar Singh had told her a number of times not to wait for him. He wanted her to have her dinner and go to bed if it got very late, but she had never been able to do that. Before Soni was married, her mother taught her that it was proper for a wife to eat only after her husband had eaten, whether in the day or night. Whenever Amar Singh came back home, he unlocked the front door quietly and entered the house

without making a noise. Then walking tiptoe into the kitchen he ate his dinner, which would be cold by then, and went to bed. Whenever he came home late, he was always careful not to disturb Soni's sleep. And in the morning, at whatever time Soni got up, she always found him making tea in the kitchen. Rubbing her sleepy eyes with her fingers, she walked into the kitchen and said with a smile, "If someone saw you doing this, he would only think that you have been married to me, and not I to you."

"Don't you worry! It's just a matter of one or two years before you will have four servants in your house: one for cleaning, another for washing clothes, a third for washing dishes and yet another for cooking; there will be servants for everything and you will not have to step down from your bed...then you can simply relax and enjoy yourself."

All that sounded very strange to Soni, and she merely gazed wonderingly at her sweet, chubby faced husband. To her, everything about him was lovely—his medium height, well-built body, his child-like face, and his short, brown beard. And he saw to it that Soni never had a problem. He remembered to buy everything she needed, from her hair pins to everything else. For the kitchen he would bring the provisions for the whole month even before he had received his salary. Kept in different jars, there were five or six kinds of tea in the kitchen, and whichever tea-leaf Soni used, he always called it the best. Soni often thought: why doesn't he complain at all? In the neighbourhood, men quarrelled with their wives even when the poor woman put some salt or spices more, or less, in the food, and there were also times when they shouted at them and abused them. But

she had not heard even a single harsh word of complain from her husband, who sometimes reminded her of that boy who went round her parents' village buying old newspapers, empty bottles, old and broken things of plastic, and wheat-bran. When that fair, large-eyed and handsome boy called out in a loud voice, she felt as if he were singing a song. When she heard him call out to his prospective sellers, she ran out into the street, but he paid no attention to her, and never paused to look at her. Calling in a loud voice, he simply went past her house. At that time, Soni must have been thirteen or fourteen years old, and she was certainly beautiful. Many boys in her locality secretly ogled at her.

It so happened that one day without knowing why, she ran to the door and asked him, "Boy, do you buy wheat-bran?"

Looking at Soni with some surprise and showing his white teeth he replied, "What else do I buy? Do you think I come here to buy gold and silver? Must I buy gold-embroidered things here, and then carry them away in this sack on my shoulder?"

And with a smile he looked the other way and began to call, "*O, sell your wheat-bran, old newspapers, broken bottles, sell them here...O...O...O.*"

After that day, Soni never asked him anything but even then, everyday when she heard his voice she always came to the door to watch him. She did not even know why she wanted to see him. And like other boys, he never even looked at her. If by chance their eyes met, he stared at her like a fool for a brief moment, and then holding tightly

with both his hands the mouth of the gunny-bag he carried on his back, he bent down a little more. She felt as if the weight of that bag had crushed his smile under it. Occasionally, he turned back and looked at her the second time, and then suddenly became conscious of his hair sticking out of his old turban. Smiling in the same manner, he tried to push the locks back into the turban, but they were so rough that they would not stay in. And for a long time, Soni stood at the door listening to his sweet, flute-like voice. Once or twice, it also happened that from the other end of the street he turned his head to look at her, and then, spread his guileless smile on the street. She never knew how the word 'spread' occurred to her, but from that day, he began to look even more attractive to her.

Then after some time, he stopped coming and no one knew where he had gone. He was never seen in that village again. But whenever Soni thought of his back bent at such a young age, first she felt sorry for him, and then smiled ... And like that boy, now her husband too had begun to look like a dainty toy. Exactly like before, sometimes she would be sad, as if she were afraid of losing that toy. After all, that boy also, who bought wheat bran, had been lost somewhere.

"WOW! We've made it," entering the house Amar Singh exclaimed, and embraced Soni standing in the courtyard.

Soni was surprised. But then taking a step backwards, her husband opened his small mouth and laughing and stroking his moustache said, "Some people have just a little luck, but see how fortunate we are!"

When he laughed and stroked his moustache in his usual manner, Soni was happy to see his open and innocent laughter, and began to smile.

Whenever she smiled, small dimples appeared in both her cheeks. Excited and saying something she did not fully understand, her husband took her in his arms; but soon leaving her and going five or six steps backwards began to regard her as if he had left his finger-marks on the wet colours of a painting, and wanted to correct it. These days he did not even come close to her. Looking into her eyes, he stood at some distance from her, and stroking with his right hand his lightly clipped moustache, and counting with his thumb on the fingers of his left hand, he began to talk as if a needle had been placed on a turning gramophone record:

“Look, there are a total of two thousand five hundred houses here. In each house there are at least two families. This makes five thousand families in all, and so it means that at least five thousand name-plates will be required. At fifty paise a name-plate it will mean two thousand five hundred rupees. The committee will give everything—pallets, brushes, colours and so on, and we are going to make a tidy sum of two thousand five hundred rupees—just like that,” he snapped his fingers and laughed heartily, and at that moment, Soni wanted to hold him in her lap like a child.

And indeed, at that instant he appeared to her as lovable as a child. She wanted to say to him, “O my delicate toy, where shall I hide you? Where shall I keep you safe?”

“Look,” making an ‘O’ with his thumb and forefinger

and pointing to Soni's painting hanging on the wall, he went on with the same enthusiasm, "You know, I will cover that painting with gold! And then – in this very place I will build a palace like house in which I'll hang the painting. Do you understand what I am saying? Do you...? Ha...ha...ha...!"

And indeed, Soni did not understand anything. Stroking his innocent face with her tender, shining eyes, she only smiled.

"See," Amar Singh continued, "It's like this. We'll make these two thousand five hundred rupees, and then, earn the same amount again. That will make five thousand rupees. Five thousand we'll borrow from somewhere. That makes it ten thousand. And it will be enough to build a first class house, grand like a palace. This old house we'll demolish. There won't be a single mud wall left standing in this place...do you understand? Tell me, what am I saying...? Ha...ha...ha...!"

And then for a long time he went on talking, going *tir-tir* like the popping of the corn being roasted. Sitting in front of him Soni too smiled.

AFTER that, Amar Singh started to come home late. Sometimes he would come back at two or three in the night. Before leaving home, he would lock the door opening into the street so that when he came back, Soni would not be disturbed. When he returned, he would be extremely tired. He generally entered the house without making the slightest noise so as not to wake her. Earlier she could not

sleep well, but now as she had nothing to do the whole day; she was bored and slept like a log. But even now, when it was a full-moon night, sleep did not come to her easily. One day, after having his evening meal, when Amar Singh was leaving, she asked him, "Could you possibly come home a bit early today?"

"Why? Is there anything special today?"

"No, nothing," she said and blushed.

"You know, there's a lot of work to do. But I'll try."

He went away. Soni did not eat her meal. After bathing with warm water she dressed up, and wore the same dress that Amar Singh admired. Very carefully, she arranged her hair in the style Amar Singh had praised so often. After getting ready, when she stood before the mirror, for a moment she could not recognize herself. For the first time, she felt the magic of her beauty. For a long time, she stood there smiling to herself. After her marriage, it was for the first time that she wanted to praise her own beauty. Her black doe-eyes, the sharp edge of her nose, the redness of her petal-like lips, the glory of her full, glowing cheeks and the radiance on her forehead, everything was matchless. But the loveliest of them all was that small mole in the centre of her chin: it became visible when she smiled but disappeared when she became serious; it was as if some charlatan was playing tricks with her.

And her beauty? Hundreds of times she had been praised for it by her friends, newly grown-up boys and aunts, but no one had ever seen that thing in her, which she found the loveliest that day. Her limbs were well-proportioned and went with her medium height: the roundness of her

shoulders and arms, the shape of her hands and feet, the length of her fingers and their shape, the swell of her breasts—there was nothing in her that was not beautiful. In her parents' village, old women often asked her mother to put a small black dot on her face so that she would be protected from the evil eye. "The evil eye can tear even rocks apart," they said.

Admiring her own beauty in the mirror, she began to feel bashful and turning her face to one side, stepped away from the mirror. For a moment, her eyes fell on her painting hanging on the wall behind, and she gazed at it for a long time. The colours in it were a bit too bright; the ornaments and clothes shown in it were as they ought to have been for a beautiful woman like her. But somehow the painting failed to reflect that inner glow that beamed out from the mirror and seemed to tickle her eyes. For a while, she was dazzled by her own beauty and felt as if she was not looking at herself but at some nymph descended from the heavens. And as she gazed at her reflection, the corners of her eyes began to take on a reddish hue, and soon they were moist.

Then she came out into the courtyard. Everything was still. No one in the adjoining houses was awake. And the full moon had climbed to the zenith. She gazed at it and felt that her mind and body were dancing. Then she wanted to dance, and slowly without her knowledge, one of her feet began to move in the rhythm of dance. When the *chhan...chhan...* rhythm of her fine silver anklets began to melt like honey into her body, she actually began to dance...and she did not know when or how her feet and hands began to move to that rhythm. Her soft fingers, arms,

waist, thighs, shoulders, neck—everything began to dance in a swirl of motion that was similar to the *gidda* she danced with her friends at her parents' house on the eve of *Teej* in the month of *Sawan*. And she went on dancing, her feet danced, and the glow on her face danced, and slowly weariness began to creep over her. She felt tired in her limbs first, and then a certain languor suffused her entire body. When she was dancing, her eyes were fixed on the moon. Sometimes she looked down at her feet, as if she wanted to hear the tinkling of her anklets with her eyes, and then, again like a *chakori* she fixed her eyes on the moon.

After some time, Soni was completely tired. She fell on her bed and for a long time could not open her eyes. The same honey appeared to flow through her every vein, and soon she was fast asleep.

But before long, rising hurriedly she got up and again stood before the mirror. The line of kol in her eyes was smudged when she rubbed them with her fingers. The lipstick too was no longer fresh. The *bindi* on her forehead was askew, but the colour of her cheeks had deepened like that of orange-wine, which seemed to intoxicate her. That intoxication was unbearable...! Her eyelids drooping, she let herself sink on the bed and lay motionless. There was still a smile on her face, and she felt as if it reached down to her feet, and as if they were still dancing.

Soni had seen the village girls dancing on the eve of *Teej*, or during marriages, but it appeared strange to her that someone could dance even on an ordinary day. But

she felt like dancing again and again, which seemed like a miracle to her.

Half the night was gone, and for about half an hour she continued to lie on the bed. She did not feel like getting up and switching off the light. Then, from her closed eyes, tears began to roll down. She was lying motionless. When, after a long time, her tears dried up, she wiped her eyes and face with her chunni, and began to gaze at her painting on the wall. There were tears still left in her eyes, and so the painting looked blurred. Her staring eyes began to hurt and she rose from the bed. Once again, she stood before the mirror, wiped her eyes and face, but lay down again on the bed, and with her hands tried to smoothen the wrinkles of her dress. Again she rose, adjusted her necklace, earrings, and bangles. Giving light pats to her dishevelled hair to set it, she ran her fingers over her entire face, and then gently began to stroke it. Once again, the languid feeling in her veins began to disappear. But her eyes were still tired; and when she tried to close them, she could not. Finding it difficult to stand, she lay down again. This time she was facing the locked entrance of the house. She rested her head on one of her arms and placed the other on the curve of her broad hips. She looked carefully at her reflection in the mirror and saw an arch being formed by her arm and the curve of her hips. For a long time she stared at that arch, and then smiling to herself, she fixed her eyes on the locked door. An hour or so passed, and she was still lying in that position. Her eyes were open. Whenever she dozed, her heart felt vaguely restless. A little sound outside, and her heart jumped and began to race.

Her eyes fell on the ancient clock on the wall belonging to grandfather's time. It was three in the night but Amar Singh had not returned. Her body felt feverish, but her eyes were open. The smile stayed on her face. When the arm on which she rested her head went to sleep, she pressed it, and continued to lie in the same position; the arch between her arm and her hips was looking beautiful; (her husband too liked it very much).

...And at half past three when she heard the sound of the outside lock opening, her heart began to pound. She tried to close her sleepy eyes but her eyelids continued to quiver.

Her husband came inside. He was tired. He saw the burning light, looked at Soni but could understand nothing.

"O, you silly girl!" he said in a low, tired voice and taking off his turban, put it on the table and murmured, "You forgot to switch off the light...how simple you are, my love!"

He switched off the light and went into the kitchen. Once again Soni's heart began to beat fast. After eating the cold meal when he lay down on the other bed, Soni's limbs began to feel languid again. Soon she felt tears - hot as burning embers - rolling down her cheeks and numbness began to fill her limbs.

"Ha...aaa...!" stretching himself her husband yawned and was soon fast asleep. The sound of his snoring began to ring in the room, piercing her heart like a dagger.

That night she did not sleep at all. Her eyes were closed. The heart continued to race the way it had done the whole night. Every part of her body seemed to be tortured... and

tears spilled from her eyes like the torrents of *Sawan*. Her arms, the quilt near her head and the bed-sheet, everything was wet, as if that day itself, all the salty water collected through her many previous lives would flow out of her eyes.

Three

"THERE you are!" placing the money in her lap her husband said, a merry spark playing like fireflies in his eyes, "Here are two thousand five hundred rupees, and by the end of the next week there will be another two thousand five hundred. And then we'll take a loan of five thousand rupees from the government—and we've done it."

Without saying anything Soni only looked at him with a smile.

"Now, keep it in a safe place," raising his hands to the sky Amar Singh said, "The Lord will give us more; only let Him keep these two hands safe...!" Grinning with pleasure he pinched her cheek lightly, and then, going *tir-tir* like popping corn, he laughed loudly. When she saw the money lying in her lap Soni too began to laugh.

And then, as if by magic he brought home another two thousand rupees in just two months. And then earning a hundred or two hundred rupees at a time, he put into

Soni's hands seven or eight thousand rupees, and there was still a month left before the *shraddha* season. Before she realized what was happening, he had brought labourers who began to demolish that old door in the mud-wall on the right side of the living room. With joy and wonder, Soni watched his 'achievement'. And soon, brick, cement, steel, stone-chips and sand began to appear on the scene. They lay scattered everywhere on the street, everywhere there were small heaps of building material. The earth of the demolished walls had raised the courtyard by two or three feet. The old wood of the doors and windows was either sold, or used as firewood. All this happened in a matter of days, as if a dream were coming true. To Soni, her husband appeared to be some magician. When she tried to lend a helping hand, he would tell her with a child's arrogance, "You just watch what is happening here. Why should you soil your beautiful hands with this old, stinking mud? Aren't there enough workers to do the job? You don't have to worry; everything will be taken care of. You just have to relax like a queen on your bed. It's not your job."

Soni obeyed him without saying anything, and only watched what was going on. Right in front of her eyes, a new house rose in the place of the old one: it had two big rooms, and an equally big drawing room, a very spacious kitchen, a toilet, a store for provisions – everything in it was new! The old living room was also demolished and was replaced by his 'Amar Studio' with large glass windows. She had no idea from where her husband got all that money to construct whatever he wanted. Once or twice she even tried to tell him, "Now, that's enough; we don't have ten

or twenty people in our family, so why should you construct all this?" Pretending to be angry, he told her, "Don't say anything. Just see what's happening. Don't you remember what grandfather said: there are only two things in this world which a man can call his friends—one, a house of your own, and the other, God's blessings. And, so long as God is with us, why should we fear...? Now do not interfere in what I am doing, let me do what I want."

In just four months, and much before the festival of *Lohri*, her large and beautiful, bungalow-like house was ready. When Soni put some old but clean bed-sheets on the beds in the new bedroom, her husband went away to the market at nine in the night. Only God knows which shop he got opened at that late hour; or what else he did, but in half an hour he was back with new bed-sheets, with which he covered the two beds.

"This house is new; we are young; then why should the things in our house be old?," he said with a smile and gave a light pat on Soni's cheek.

Gradually, old things were replaced by new ones, but what was old was not thrown away; everything was kept carefully in the store-room. Soni found the changes taking place all around her a pleasant experience, and as time passed, she began to like that house more and more. But Amar Singh became increasingly busy because he had to pay back the loan he had taken to buy all those things in the house. Now he did not have any fixed hours for eating or for going to bed. For days he would not even change his clothes. Soni often drew his attention to it but he only said, "All right, I'll do it," and then, he lost himself in work

again. He had taken so much of work upon himself that there was no time left for anything else. Half the day he spent at school. Then almost every week he painted large hoardings for the local cinema hall, in which faces of the actors and actresses in the film had also to be painted. After that, whatever time he had was spent in Mitthu's shop, where he painted signboards.

"For God's sake, relax a little and look after your health also," one day she said to him.

But without letting her finish, he began to lecture, "See, you do not know anything about this world." With a grave look on his face he went on like an old man, "I've seen the world and I know what is what. It is money that makes the world go. Grandfather always said, 'My child, people will be your friends only till the time you have money in your pocket. When you lose your money, no one will care to take a second look at you.' Money is what is known as *maya* in this world. This entire world is *maya*: The One who is sitting up there in the blue sky has created it. The logic is very simple: God has created *maya*; God has also created us; then where is the difference between *maya* and us? Am I clear? You, of course, are too young to understand these profound truths of life; but I know everything, because I have seen the world. Grandfather used to say..."

Soni only smiled but made no reply. But if he still went on sermonizing like that she joined her palms in a gesture of humility, and bending low as if to touch his feet said, "Now, please forgive me, Guru jee, I'm very sorry!"

And raising his hand in a grand manner, as if he were blessing her, he said, "You are forgiven," and then both of

them burst into loud peals of laughter.

When he said that, she felt an indulgent tenderness for him. Sometimes she thought that only a man like him deserved to be called a true husband. However, she did not know what it was, but there was something in that husband of hers that made her feel uneasy in a vague manner. With time, that feeling of unease threatened to grow into a chasm between them. At those moments, that full house looked empty to her. She felt as if she had everything, and yet nothing.

AFTER they constructed their new house, women in the neighbourhood began to visit Soni very frequently, and spent a great deal of time with her. Even those women who did not care to greet her earlier now spent hours with her. They praised her husband and her grandfather. Soni was often bored with their talk, which seemed to be quite repetitive. But if for some reason, the women did not come to her house for a day or two, she felt vaguely dissatisfied. She could not understand why it happened.

As compared to the past, now Soni's husband spent less time at Mitthu's shop. At night he worked at home in his 'studio'. Perhaps that's why Soni felt happier now. As long as he was working, she would be there, busy in her knitting and embroidery. Every hour or so, she brought tea for him. When she saw him working and at the same time sipping his tea, she thought it was a wonderfully attractive sight. As Amar Singh painted the letters on the board, his eyes were riveted on the letter he was painting. There would

be three pens stuck between the fingers of this left hand; one or two behind his ear or pushed into the tuft of his hair. His hair was short and curly and often disheveled. Framed by his hair; his face looked like a brass pot placed on an oven with a black saucepan lying upside down on it. How pleasant it was to think of his face in that way! Like a chameleon his white vest kept changing colours and his trousers too were smeared with them. When he worked, he forgot everything else except the need to have his occasional cup of tea. That absent-mindedness of her husband fascinated Soni.

Now there would be a lot of work for her too. After sending off Amar Singh to school, the first thing she would do was to clean the 'Amar Studio'. Very carefully she would dust, clean or wash everything there and put it in its proper place. The studio would be in a real mess: scattered everywhere he left pens and brushes with colours on them. The floor was blotched with colour and varnish. In the beginning, she found the smell of kerosene unpleasant but gradually she began to like it. When she cleaned those brushes or pallets and arranged them in the wooden box, she felt like a painter herself. Like an artist! Every day she arranged his things carefully, and every day Amar Singh scattered them again, but somehow she had begun to like the chore. It made her feel as if she was doing something important; she felt like a true partner of her husband.

"Now, from today you are free," with a note of pride in his voice Amar Singh said to her one day, and placing his hand on the boy's shoulder standing next to him continued, "From today he is going to be my helper. Now you don't

have to soil your hands with colours.”

Soni remained silent.

The next day, she felt as if someone had snatched something away from her. The boy was good-looking, well-built and quite smart. A little signal from Amar Singh and he knew exactly what was expected of him, and did it promptly. For a few days Soni just watched him without saying anything, but one day Heaven knows why she exploded:

“I’ll not allow him into my kitchen...who knows what caste he is!”

Surprised, Amar Singh looked at her beautiful face flushed red with anger.

“Are you listening? I’ll not allow him anywhere in the house outside your studio,” glowering at the boy she shouted. For a few moments, Amar Singh could not say anything.

“What’s the problem?” Amar Singh’s face had fallen but he tried to laugh, “You speak as if by bringing him into the house I have committed a terrible sin. If you feel like that, he will remain with me and won’t go to any other part of the house. Will you be happy then?,” Amar Singh began to laugh loudly, but the curious thing was that the look of anger on Soni’s face remained.

And after that day, she did not allow the boy into the kitchen. Every hour or so, she left her knitting or embroidery, got up, and herself made tea for her husband. At other times, she sat in the courtyard, doing some needle-work and occasionally watching the boy—sometimes without saying anything, and sometimes muttering with

anger. The poor boy was always scared, and kept his eyes on the ground. His earlier enthusiasm too had disappeared.

Then one day, as she finished making the tea, quite abruptly and without any apparent reason she said to the boy, "Boy, I am tired. Now next time, you will make the tea."

Coming out of the kitchen, she sat on a large stool and watched the two of them as if it was for the first time that she had seen them there. Somewhat surprised, Amar Singh smiled and began to drink his tea, but Soni looked away.

When Amar Singh signalled the boy to bring tea, he came balancing three cups on a tray and bending low before Soni said, "You tea, *Bibi jee*."

"And I always thought you were good for nothing!" smiling, she picked up the cup, and shyness made the boy's face go red.

"He is a real gem; you must know his value," Amar Singh seemed to be beaming with joy.

After that day, Soni's attitude towards the boy changed. It must have been almost ten or fifteen days since he had begun to work for them but Soni had not cared to ask him even his name. She was herself surprised by that. (She had not heard Amar Singh mention his full name; and if at all he did, she had not paid attention to it.)

"Arre, what's your name?," picking up her cup of tea she asked him one day.

"Jee, my name is Peeta."

"Peeta or Peetu?"

"My full name is Pritam but everyone calls me Peetu."

"It's a lovely name!" she smiled.

"Jee, I was given this name by my parents; I did not choose it myself. They could have called me anything, could I have stopped them?"

"Well said!" she laughed.

Preetu came inside the studio, and Amar Singh did not know what Soni had said to the boy. He was lost in his work. Soni peeped inside the room a number of times but Preetu avoided looking at her. That day, for the first time, Soni realized that Preetu was very good-looking, perhaps even more so than her husband.

The next day, when Amar Singh went out for something in the evening, Preetu began to clean the brushes and the pallets. Soni walked up to him and said, "After you finish this, come inside, into the other room...all right?"

Preetu did not say anything. After he had washed his hands and face he went into the room. Soni asked him to put on Amar Singh's old but clean clothes lying on the bed, and then as she went out of the room she said to him, "After you change your clothes, come outside."

For some time Preetu hesitated. Then he put on the clothes and came out, but he was feeling so shy that he could not raise his eyes from the ground. Soni beamed with joy but only said, "Now see, how nice they look on you!"

After that day, Preetu never appeared before Soni in dirty clothes, or without taking his bath or combing his hair. (It seemed as if he had known the secret wish of his 'mistress'.)

In a few days, Soni knew everything about Preetu. He belonged to a nearby village. His parents made their living

by doing odd jobs during marriages. He had an elder sister, about whose marriage the parents were constantly worried. That was the reason why after passing class eight from the Middle School in the village, he did not continue his studies and came to work with his *Ustad jee*. When Soni asked him about his *Ustad jee* he said, "*Ustad jee* is like God to me. He has promised to teach me painting and also to help me pass class ten. I'll not be able to repay his debt even in my seven lives, *jee*."

"Oh ho, so you also know that a man has seven lives!" Soni said in a mocking voice.

"*Jee*, I do not know about these things, I have only heard people saying it," he blushed and smiled.

Soni also began to smile.

SONI sometimes felt that she was no longer a young girl, but a responsible housewife and the mistress of a big house! How big that new house was and how many things were there in it! Moreover, there was also a servant to help her...though he was not exactly like other servants; she considered him to be a member of the family...In a few weeks more, she would become a mother; then she would have greater responsibilities. When she thought of her parents' home, the word 'mother' brought a blush to her face, but then the idea of having 'grown up' also occurred to her. She was free to feel the way she liked, but time would not stop simply because she wished it to.

Time had to pass and so it passed; and a daughter was born to her. For the delivery Amar Singh did not send her

to her parents' house as was the custom. The baby was born in a hospital. He sent a message to Soni's mother. She came, and returned after staying there for ten or fifteen days. Soni was sad for a few days. When the women in the neighbourhood saw that she had given birth to a daughter, instead of congratulating her they only sighed and saying, "It's all in the hands of God," went away.

But Amar Singh never let her feel depressed. "You just see, I will make her such a great painter that people will forget Amrita Shergil. I will send her to Paris to receive the best training in painting. Then you'll see..." stroking his moustache and laughing softly, he said.

At such moments, Soni thought he was just daydreaming. But then, at times she also wanted to believe him. In just about two years, he had achieved what was beyond even her dreams. When she remembered that Amar Singh did not sound like a boastful liar but looked like a prince who had travelled through God knows which skies on his flying horse, and had come back after marrying seven princesses. Hundreds of times, she had heard such stories when she was a child. (And sometimes they sounded true also.) But it was difficult to know why just a moment later, she would feel sad. What if he really took her daughter to some other place, what would she do alone in that big house? With such fears in her heart, she thought of her toy-like husband who seemed to her a real prince and not an ordinary man ...or perhaps he was only a monkey running here and there on rooftops, gibbering *chir-chir*. When that thought came to her, she laughed.

IN the next two years, another daughter joined Soni's family. Problems multiplied. Her husband had taken up many more assignments now. Frightened like a dove in a hunter's net, she looked around her as if she was not in her house but was lost in a forest.

One day when Amar Singh told her that he was going to open a big shop with Mitthu as his partner, she was shocked. She could not even ask him where, when and how that shop would be opened. But Amar Singh was extremely excited with the idea of starting a new business. He never stopped talking about it, though she could not understand everything he said. Only Heaven knows what plans he was making: he wanted to go on a long leave from his school and move to the new capital of Punjab. Soni came to know of his plans only when he began his preparations for moving to the new capital.

"And what about us...," in a timid, small voice Soni asked him one day.

"You...?" With some surprise Amar Singh looked at her and then began to laugh. He pulled up his belt with his left hand, winked with his left eye, touched his stylishly clipped moustache and said, "For you there is this glass-palace constructed like an Englishman's bungalow. And you also have two dolls to play with; a loyal servant like Preetu to do the household chores, and new crinkling notes to spend! And this 'servant' of yours is going to a new place only to earn more money for you. You only have to call him once...and your servant will come running to you!"

And laughing, when he held in his hands Soni's fair and beautiful face, which had taken on a new glow these

days, she suddenly felt a chill go through her body; perhaps it was because his hands were cold; or perhaps because of something strange happening inside her. For a while, she peered into the star-like brightness of her husband's eyes...and then rested her head against his shoulder. When he embraced her with some hesitation, Soni began to weep. Amar Singh laughed and running his hand down her back said, "I am your servant, madam. I say, just call me and I'll come to you with wads of currency notes...!"

And he began to laugh loudly. But, helplessly, Soni's eyes continued to shed tears.

Four

IN the morning when Amar Singh got down from the train, Mitthu was waiting for him. First he bent down and tried to touch Amar Singh's feet, but as he was held before he could do it, they hugged each other.

"It's really been a long wait for me, *ustad*," Mitthu said complaining.

"You know how much work I have. Even this time, I had to leave many things unfinished. If I hadn't, I don't know how much longer it would have taken me to come here," patting Mitthu's back Amar Singh hugged him repeatedly. Despite not getting enough sleep during the journey, his face looked fresh as a flower. He was constantly talking. His loose turban kept falling over his eyes. He pushed it back, but the next moment it would slip down again. These were the mannerisms of his *ustad* that Mitthu found funny and so standing right there on the platform he began to giggle.

"You are laughing?" Amar Singh understood why he was giggling. His eyes dancing, he broke into a grin himself and said, "I'll not change, *ustad*, no matter where I go, whether to America or Canada." Then changing the topic he said, "It's really a lovely place!" Then throwing his glance around, he began to talk about something else. "What remarkable scenery, isn't it? On one side, there are the mountains and on the other, what greenery and what fine roads! And the houses too are so different! Wow!"

"*Ustad jee*, there is a lot to see here. You've hardly seen anything," smiling and taking out a pack of cigarettes from the pocket of his tight trousers he lighted a cigarette and continued, "It's like being in heaven. You get everything here; from the cheapest to the most expensive. Anything can be achieved here; you can do whatever you wish."

"You haven't changed, my friend," patting his shoulder affectionately Amar Singh said in a tired voice, "Now, let's go; I didn't have any sleep last night."

Mitthu stroked his long thick hair, put the cigarette between his lips, tucked properly his dark-coloured shirt under the belt, and called a coolie. Watching him, Amar Singh felt that many things in Mitthu had changed. But he did not entirely dislike the changed Mitthu. He laughed, and once again placing his hand on his shoulder said, "I like your idea; when you are in a new place, you should behave like the people there."

But the smartness of his clever student was proved to Amar Singh only when he reached Mitthu's shop. He was surprised to see that in two or three months only, Mitthu had managed to set up a shop, which perhaps he himself

could not have managed in years. The shop itself was small, hardly ten feet by fifteen; but there were so many boards stacked into it that hardly any room was left. At the back, Mitthu had erected a partition of boards behind which was his cot. In that part, there was a loft which served as the store. That too was overflowing with colour-cans, and all kinds of odds and ends, and there was hardly any space left in it to store anything else. The more Amar Singh saw the shop from inside and outside, the more his heart leapt with joy.

“Surprised, *ustad*? We have another store at the back. Here I keep only the things I readily need,” Mitthu glanced round and said hastily, “All right, now rest for an hour or so on this cot, because if the junior *ustad* comes here, he won’t let you sleep.”

Amar Singh was still astonished at what Mitthu had done. He moved towards the bed with tired steps; but felt that he would not be able to rest. When there was so much work left to do, sleeping did not make sense!

“Okay, little brother, I’ll take rest later, first get me a cup of tea.”

“It’s coming right away! I thought you were tired and wanted to rest. There is enough tea in this place. If you want, you can drink the whole canister of it,” Mitthu replied and went out.

Amar Singh lay down on the cot and watched each board very carefully. He was surprised to notice the shape and neatness of some of the letters painted on them. He had been painting letters for ten years now, but even he had not been able to achieve such neatness and skill. Again

and again, his eyes strayed to those boards and who can say what thoughts were crossing his mind then?

Mitthu brought some tea and a great deal else to go with it. When Mitthu offered him a large cup of tea Amar Singh looked at his face with disbelief.

"Mitthu," suddenly patting his shoulder lightly Amar Singh said, "It's marvellous, friend. You have done wonders here."

"I have not done anything great, *ustad jee*. Wonderful things will happen now that you are here to guide me."

"Arre, what's the problem now? What's not possible if the two of us are together? We can even darn the sky," Amar Singh said laughing.

Mitthu was happy that the very first impression on the *ustad* was good. Praise coming from Amar Singh was like a divine boon for him.

After the tea was taken, Mitthu closed the shop behind him and went out for some work. Amar Singh was tired but he found it difficult to sleep. For a couple of minutes he lay on the cot, and then getting up began to move around the shop. He ran his fingers on the boards, and studied the types of colours and pens used. Then he read the names on the name-plates. He was still feeling excited when opening the door of the shop two boys came in.

'Sat Sri Akal! Big *ustad jee*,' The older boy, who had a pock-marked face and a dark complexion, smiled and began to speak before Amar Singh could say anything, "Yesterday itself *ustad jee* told us that you were coming. We were very happy, *jee*. *Ustad jee* says that you are a very great painter.

You are the *ustad* of even our *ustad*. Then for us you are our big *ustad jee*, aren't you?"

And he continued to talk, but Amar Singh could not follow a thing he was saying. The boy seemed very clever; he seemed to have seen the world. The other boy with him looked very innocent and simple. He was fair, had a pleasing face and was of medium height. Feeling shy he was mumbling something. Once or twice he tried to meet the *ustad's* eyes, and then lowered his gaze.

"Well boy, what's your name?" feeling bored with the chatter of the dark boy, Amar Singh asked the other one.

"Jee, Mittu Miyan," he replied in a sweet voice.

"Mittu Miyan? What kind of name is this?" Amar Singh was surprised.

"Jee, Miyan is a clan among us mountain people."

The boy sounded somewhat hesitant. Amar Singh found his speech and shyness very attractive. Feeling suddenly pleased with him he moved closer to him and patting him on his back said, "Can you also do something or are you still learning...?"

"Jee, it hasn't been long since I began."

"Big *ustad jee*, he is not very good at his work and is also slightly dull; but even then he will manage," when widening the flanges of his frog-like nose and raising his slightly thick lips in an expression of contempt, the other boy interrupted, Amar Singh did not like it at all. He scowled at the boy and noticed that he had a tall, skeleton-like body and his limbs were long and had something ungainly about them. In his blue tight trousers his legs looked like *bidis*. He wore a shirt with large flowers printed

on it. It was tight on his chest as if it had been glued there.

"What's your name," Amar Singh asked in a rough voice.

"My name is Sultan Akbar, *jee*."

To Amar Singh he sounded as arrogant as a nawab.

"Sultan must have been the great grandfather of the great grandfather of your great grandfather, but why are you acting so haughty?"

"*Jee*, what did you say?"

"Your mother's head!"

Akbar could not understand what the *ustad* had said, and so he began to giggle. Amar Singh also began to laugh, and when Mittu Miyan saw him laughing, he also threw in a timid smile.

Then Sultan Akbar picked up a dirty piece of cloth and began to dust a half-written board. Amar Singh was surprised to see how quickly he prepared the colours and began to paint the letters on the board. He had never seen a painter with such neat and fast hand. His anger disappeared and he smiled.

In the other part of the room the poor Mittu Miyan was frantically looking for something but was unable to find it.

"What is our monkey from the mountains looking for?," entering the shop Mitthu asked.

"*Jee*, I'm looking for that pallet."

"It's there," pointing to the left corner Mitthu said harshly, and then turning to Amar Singh said with some surprise, "You're still awake, *Ustad jee*?"

"I just didn't feel like sleeping."

"Now that these monkeys are here, you will not be able to get any sleep at all."

"It's all right; we have our whole life left to sleep; now we must wake up," Amar Singh spoke in a casual manner. His eyes were fixed on the brush in Sultan Akbar's hand. Suddenly he said, "You've picked up a good student; he has a remarkable hand."

"But he is only a sample, *Ustad jee*. Tomorrow when I show you another painter's work, who is the father of this boy's father in skill, you won't believe your eyes. There is no shortage of skilled artists here; in this place they breed like young scorpions."

IN the next four or five days, Amar Singh saw those 'young scorpions'. During the day, four or five boys came to the shop for two or three hours at a time and after completing their work quickly went away. Amar Singh was amazed to see the nimbleness of their fingers. Sometimes he had the feeling that he was a novice before them. But he was happy about one thing: there was enough work for him. He could sleep hardly for four or five hours. During those four or five hours also, he could, if he wanted, do his work. Mitthu had managed things so well that the boys could keep the lights on in the store at the back and work till late into the night. For this purpose, he had kept himself on good terms with the night-beat constables, guards and even the shop inspectors, and so they never visited his shop for inspection.

In a week's time Mitthu handed over to Amar Singh

all work in the shop and told him that instead of doing the work himself, he should make the boys work. But Amar Singh could never do that. To him the boys seemed cleverer than himself, and whatever was lacking in him was more than made up by Sultan Akbar. Acting as the manager of the shop Sultan made the boys work like machines. The boys too were fast like Akbar. Only poor Mittu was slightly slow; that's why Amar Singh made him his assistant. He was a very shy and a very good boy. He never made mischief nor spoke much, but did quietly whatever he was asked.

Amar Singh got up in the morning, and after getting ready, began to work. Sometimes he forgot even to eat his meals. Only when he was completely drained out would he go to bed; and that too very late in the night. During the entire day, Mitthu could make only two or three rounds of the shop. He was always in a hurry; he came and went in a rush. Amar Singh could never know from where the key-boards, name-plates, and canvases came and where they went. Fresh colours, varnish, oil and brushes were brought in and the old ones were discarded at regular intervals. Amar Singh never had a chance to go out to see how many and what kind of markets the city had; and where and in which areas the shops were located. Mitthu had taken upon himself the entire responsibility of work related to the market. Amar Singh's job was to stay in the shop, do the work and get the job done. He did not have to worry about anything outside the shop.

But one day, quite unexpectedly, Mitthu brought a brand new green scooter and parking it in front of the shop, asked Amar Singh to finish whatever he was doing. He

gave him only a few minutes to clean his hands and face, set his beard, wear new clothes and sit on the pillion seat, looking like a 'human being'. When like the *Toofan Mail* he drove the scooter on the roads of the city, Amar Singh felt that Mitthu had taken him out of a hole into the open sky—into the land of the fairies!...Neither did the houses nor the people in this city look like what he had seen in other towns. Though their faces were like those of our own people, there was much in them that seemed to belong to some other country.

"Mitthu, what is that?" Amar Singh wondered aloud when he saw a tall multistoried building.

"It is the Secretariat, *ustad!*"

"What's that?"

"A big government office," Mitthu bent his head a little and peering at him over his dark glasses replied. Amar Singh felt a little embarrassed. (Mitthu surely thought that he was a complete fool and did not know anything about the modern world).

After that he did not ask Mitthu anything. In a confused state of mind, he continued to watch that wonderful world silently.

There was a body of water stretching far into the distance where Mitthu stopped. Amar Singh looked about him with wonder. By the time Mitthu came back after parking the scooter he knew where he was. He had heard Sultan Akbar praising that lake a number of times.

All along the embankment of the lake, a broad and neat road ran; and on the other side—where the hills stood—the setting orange sun, making the water look

golden, presented a lovely sight. With Mitthu at his side, Amar Singh walked along the edge of the lake and watched the two boats floating on water like ducks. To him it looked very lovely and slowly a smile spread on his face. But he was also a little alarmed to see the way some boys and girls acted with such openness. They hugged one another quite openly in public. For a long time, his eyes chased a girl wearing dark glasses and a tight and provocative dress. She spoke English, and in a very strange manner she sometimes leaned on the shoulder of the girl standing next to her, and sometimes she held the arm of a young boy and fell all over him.

"*Ustad jee*, surprised with this only?" Mitthu said laughing.

"No, it's not that," attempting to hide his feelings Amar Singh said, "I was only trying to find out what thing it is- a boy, a girl or a eunuch?"

"There is a lot more to see here, *ustad jee*. I've brought you out of that hole of a shop to see all this, so that you know how much the world has progressed."

Amar Singh did not understand exactly what Mitthu was hinting at; nor could he make sense of all those people walking and running there. Sometimes he suspected that Mitthu was feeding him with made-up stories. That is why a number of times he looked at him with suspicion in his eyes. But the confidence with which he talked made Amar Singh feel that his suspicion was perhaps without any basis. He thought—was all that possible...? It might even have been true. But then, another part of his mind could not accept that taxi drivers took women of respectable families

to big hotels to sleep with them, and also that only things like wine, cigarettes and women had become the *dharma* and *karma* of this age. He was reminded of what his grandfather used to say: *Sarm, dharma doye chhapp khalote, koord phire pardhan ve Lalo!* (Guru Nanak Dev ji says to his disciple Bhai Lalo, "O Lalo, a feeling of guilt and *dharma* (truth, duty, work etc.) are nowhere to be seen here. One does not know where they are hiding; only falsehood is chiefly visible here!") Was it not like that even in the time of the Gurus?

"What's so strange in it, *ustad jee?*" Mitthu went on repeating when he saw how confused Amar Singh was, "The simple fact of the matter is that you have not seen the world. This world has advanced a great deal. It is the age of rockets, not of the bullock-cart; do you understand *ustad jee?*"

And like an innocent child Amar Singh looked first at Mitthu's face, then smiled, and then lowered his eyes to the ground shyly; as if he really did not know anything about the advancing world. He was indeed a rustic and a fool, what else was he?

As the sun dimmed, darkness thickened still more. The tube-lights along the road began to glow. From a distance they looked very bright and Amar Singh's heart seemed to dance with joy when he saw their reflection in water.

It was no longer very hot. He began to like the lake stretching on the left side of the road, and also that soft fragrance coming from all sides.

"Shall we sit on the grass for some time?" with an eager desire he asked Mitthu.

"But, *ustad jee*, there is someone waiting for us," Mitthu winked at him and smiled mysteriously. Amar Singh, of course, did not know what he was talking about. Without saying anything he kept his eyes on the glimmering light reflected by the water and enjoyed the mellow fragrance of the grass; as if he had forgotten everything else.

He did not know when and after crossing how many places they came back to where they had parked the scooter. He felt a certain tiredness creeping up his legs and placing both his hands on Mitthu's shoulders, he sat behind him on the scooter. Mitthu drove the scooter so fast that Amar Singh felt that the lights of the houses and the street-lights rushing past him were like glowing fireflies. Finally, Mitthu turned the scooter into a dark alley. Driving through winding streets, he brought the scooter to a place where there were very few lighted houses around.

"This is our bungalow, *ustad jee*! ...secluded and very quiet!" switching off the ignition Mitthu said in a low voice. But Amar Singh could not catch anything except 'this bungalow'.

It was a big house with many rooms. Both the inside and the outside were lighted by coloured bulbs. Amar Singh was astonished to see the place. But Mitthu went into the veranda and pressed the calling bell. Half a minute later a fair girl opened the door and said with a smile, "O uncle, is that you? Please do come in."

The girl ran inside. Making a gesture with his hand, Mitthu asked Amar Singh to follow. When he reached inside, he seemed to freeze like stone. Strange thoughts whirled in his mind and he could not say anything. He

wanted to ask Mitthu where he was but his tongue appeared to have turned into wood and he could not speak. The room was furnished like a palace. There were expensive carpets, sofa, pictures, dim lights, heavy curtains and strange paintings by foreign and Indian painters. Amar Singh's heart seemed to shrink as if with an unknown fear. But Mitthu went in and sprawled on the sofa as if his father owned that house. Timidly crossing the corridor after him, Amar Singh first looked this way and that, and then fixed his eyes on the silken curtain hanging right in the middle of the wall.

"Make yourself comfortable, *ustad jee*," Mitthu said casually, "Take it as your own house. You are looking as if we are lost in a forest."

Hesitantly, Amar Singh stepped forward and sat down on the sofa on the right side of Mitthu. But his eyes were still fixed on the curtain on the right. And after a while the curtain moved. And then he saw... a nymph, smiling as if strewing flowers about her entered. She walked on the carpet as if she were floating on the clouds. She wore a milk-white sari; whether it was silk or *kimkhab*, Amar Singh could not tell. She was fair like the sari she wore. She wore a sleeveless blouse and in her feet... but before Amar Singh's eyes could travel down to them she came and stood close to him.

"Good evening, madam," smiling and greeting her with joined palms Mitthu said, and remained standing till she sat down.

Amar Singh stood up in confusion, but forgot to greet her. Till the 'nymph' had not taken her seat, he too stood

and watched her. As he sat down, he joined both his palms in greeting. The nymph looked at him from head to toe with a searching glance. Her shining, sharp and smiling eyes made Amar Singh feel as if an electric current had passed through his body, and he lowered his eyes.

After that, she and Mitthu talked for a long time. Amar Singh heard clearly every word she said, and felt a sweet tickle in his ears. While she was speaking, Amar Singh continued to stare at the painting on the left wall without any reason. The painting depicted the bank of a clear stream flowing at the foot of a mountain; and in the water, which was limpid like glass small and round pebbles of many colours could be seen so clearly that they seemed to be real. The ripples in the water were painted in such a way that the music made by them could also be heard. On the bank and beyond, trees swayed in the breeze. They kissed the sky, which looked like an inverted bowl. He could hear the sougling wind blowing through them, and playing with them...and after some time Amar Singh began to feel that the painting was done only to express the voice of that nymph. When she spoke, he felt as if a voice came out of that painting. The ripples too seemed to be singing.

With great politeness and in a honeyed voice Mitthu was talking to her. For the first time Amar Singh had seen such gravity and simplicity on his face.

"All right, I will bring tea for you," after a while the woman said and got up; moving every limb in her body with great care. Out of sheer politeness, Mitthu could not refuse her offer.

Amar Singh threw a full glance on the nymph's back

disappearing behind the curtain, and when her beautiful body stood before him in its full glory once again, he felt that an electric current had flashed through him.

"So, how is it master?" Mitthu looked at him, winked and said in a low voice.

"What did you say?" for a moment Amar Singh stared at him as if he could not follow him.

Mitthu only smiled.

At that moment Amar Singh felt completely lost and did not know where he was or to whom he was talking. Dark spots swam before his eyes and he felt greatly disturbed.

"I am leaving now. I can't stay here any more. I'm not feeling well," muttering, he stood up, his head bent low.

"What's the matter, master?"

"Just let me go."

"Okay, let's have tea at least, and then we'll go. Only two minutes more."

"No," Amar Singh said in a firm voice, "Enough. I can't stay here any longer."

"It's really strange, my friend. Your heart should feel thrilled here."

But without listening to him Amar Singh went out of the room. Following him with soft steps Mitthu said nervously, "You are a strange man, *ustad*. What will she think of us?"

But Amar Singh made no reply, nor did he look back; he walked straight out of the house on to the road.

"All right, just wait for a minute. Let me at least say sorry to her, otherwise she will be offended."

But even then he did not stop. Mitthu, who was following him, saw him walking away with quick steps, and turned back.

Stretching far into the distance on the two sides of the road were some old and thick mango trees which had still not been felled. (In that area, not many houses had been constructed yet.) To him their shapes appeared like tall hillocks. In the stars twinkling into the sky everywhere, he could see the same faces that he had seen only a few moments ago. In those stars he could see that woman wearing a milk-white sari, and also that painting with colours like a woman's; and that clear stream, flowing like the end of the woman's sari over which flew a bird with white wings, which had come from God knows where. Now the sky too began to look white to him.

Five

IN the past, every week a letter would surely come from him; then it started to come after ten or twelve days, and then ultimately the gap grew to twenty or twenty-five days, or even a month. In the beginning his letters were long and simple like Amar Singh's character. Then they became short, obscure and sounded strange. Sometimes there would be such a letter also:

Soni jee, there is a lot of work here. If I can manage it, I'll come this month itself, or else I'll see. All this is in God's hands; man cannot do anything. We'll have to live and eat wherever God has destined us to. I had pain in my eyes. Now they are slightly better. Rest is all right. Take care of the children. If you need anything, write to me. In this place foreign goods are also available. They are very good. But yes, they are slightly expensive. But money is not a problem, earning is good in this place. Reply soon. Love to children.

*Your own,
Amar Singh Anbhol*

When she read the first such letter she could not understand it. Sometimes she felt very sad, and sometimes she laughed at something seemingly silly. And she had never been able to understand the meaning of that 'Anbhol' he had begun to add to his name. In the first few months, when he was writing to her regularly, he repeated one thing constantly, and it was that he was looking for a good house to rent. He said that after finding a suitable house, he would bring Soni and children to the city. Sometimes Soni would get excited with the thought of going there and tried to imagine how the new city looked. What kind of people it had; they would certainly not be like those in this small *mandi*? In this place, what was the point of having a good house when the sand and dust from the neighbouring buildings settled into the courtyard and made it dirty? Women shouted at, or beat, their young children without any reason. Late in the night, the sound of crying children disturbed her. At least she would be able to escape from that environment.

But after some time, his letters stopped mentioning that he was looking for a house. Soni too began to accept the fact that she would have to stay in the same house. Then she thought: after all what would she do in that city? Here at least she was on good terms with her neighbours. They stood by her both in good times and bad. Only God knew how she would get along with people in that big city. In such places people living on the ground floor did not know who lived on the first. Sometimes she thought, where and what kind of food was her husband eating? Then she smiled to herself when she thought: when he was here, did

he eat in the kitchen taking into his plate hot chapattis straight from the pan? He had also written to her that in the city a person could eat good meals in forty or fifty rupees a month. Then he wrote, "Now I have a servant. He prepares good chapattis, *dal* and vegetables for me. I've no problem. Don't worry about me. Everything is fine."

And a year had passed since then. Soni's restlessness began to grow everyday. Like his letters, Amar Singh came home for one or two days once in a month or after two months. Now, he hardly came even once in three or four months. This time six months had passed and there was no sign of him. When his letters came they said the same thing: there was so much work that he had no time even to scratch his head. Soni was bored with reading the same sentence again and again. And now she simply glanced at his letters and put them aside without reading them.

Her house was in a place that was almost like a village, and so she did not have to face many problems. Close to her house lived shopkeepers, tailors and cobblers. Soni was friendly with their families; therefore, she received help whenever she needed it. Because of her gentle nature, she got along well with everyone. If someone needed money, she loaned it to him. If a person was not able to return it, she would not embarrass him by giving constant reminders. That is why people in the locality cared for her. Some old women even respected her because she was the daughter-in-law of Vaidya Baba. (When he was alive, Vaidya Baba was a highly respected figure in this small town and common people took his advice in making their decisions). Because her house was in the middle of other houses, there was no

feeling of insecurity. She had brought her fourteen or fifteen year old nephew Makhee from her parents' family who did her daily marketing and helped her in the house. Every two or three days, Preetu also came. (He was working in someone's house nearby). Thus, she had not faced any problem in the last two years or so.

Five years had passed since her marriage, but there were moments when she felt that she had been married, not for five, but for fifty years. When she thought that, it seemed funny; and she smiled. (But when many months passed and Amar Singh did not come home, even if she had that thought, she was not able to smile. Then she began to wait for his letter more eagerly. But the letter did not come. Such was her condition those days).

Then quite suddenly, one day a letter from him came. It had only a single short sentence, "*I am coming home this Saturday.*" There was neither her name in it nor anything like 'my dearest'. And neither was there anything about their daughters. Soni was very sad, and those three days passed like three years; but time had to pass and so it passed.

On Saturday, she asked Maakhi to bring eggplants from the market. She roasted them and then mashed them, and cooked salted rice with peas for Amar Singh. (When he was here, he would request her to cook these two delicacies at least once a week). After finishing her cooking she bathed and wore that pink dress with large flower patterns on it, which was Amar Singh's favourite. She combed her hair, made a braid of it; (he used to say that her braided hair 'fell sinuously on her back like a snake'). She breast-fed the younger daughter Mana and when she sang a lullaby

to her, the child went to sleep. But the older one was three and half, and was 'grown up'. She began to sing in joy because her papa was coming and did not go to bed even after being told a number of times. For a long time she had been watching Soni bathing, and getting ready. She had been following her, sometimes going out of the house with her, sometimes going inside. Then out of eagerness when Soni opened the door and peered into the street, it appeared that Ambi had an excuse for not going to bed. With 'let me see if papa is coming' she went to the door one moment, but the next moment with 'no, not yet', she returned. In the room she lay beside her mother, sucking her thumb, or sometimes humming something.

"When papa comes, I will say to him, why has he gone so far? Why does he not live with us? Ammi, tell me, please!"

"Shut up. You should not speak like that about papa," Soni chided her a number of times, but Ambi would not keep quiet. Once or twice she even shouted at her mother:

"You tell me, how I should speak. What should I say? I don't know any other way. How should I speak?"

As darkness fell, Soni's impatience turned into growing irritation. She tried hard to make Ambi go to bed, but she did not sleep. When she looked at the clock she thought: now the time for the last bus too has passed. The hush of the cold and dark winter night began to spread. And when Ambi still did not go to bed, suddenly Soni slapped her. Ambi began to howl. Rattled, Soni pulled her into her lap and stroked her with love, (and in doing that her dress was all crumpled), but Ambi did not stop crying.

“Soni, what has happened? Why is she crying?,” that was Radhe Panditain knocking at the door. Soni mumbled some excuse and sent her back.

She thought: how could she go before anyone else in that pink dress, which she had put on only for him?

It was a long time before Ambi went to sleep with her thumb in her mouth. (In the other room Maakhi too had gone to sleep after a long wait). When she saw both her daughters sleeping, she felt a bit lighter, though the feeling of unease remained. She placed both the children on the bed and put a blanket over them and then she herself lay down on the other bed and placed her head on the quilt. When she ran her eyes on the roof and walls of the room, again and again she felt that she was not in her house but was lost in some dark forest. Before lying down she had switched on the green light on the wall at the head of the bed, and in its light she could see tall green grass all around her. In the room, there were heavy light blue curtains; a heavy flower vase in the corner in which her husband had carefully arranged dried reed-stalks. Half of its cotton-like white flowers had fallen; in the beginning they had fallen slowly, but in the last few months they disappeared much more rapidly. To her, the flowers looked as ugly as the letters of Amar Singh, but still Soni had not thrown the stalks away but had kept them as they were. The green shade of grass had covered everything: the numerous children’s toys kept on open shelves in the cupboard in front of her, (that black bear among them looked particularly hideous), the old books on the lower shelf, the small and big photographs on the wall, some of which belonged to the time when her

husband had them snapped with his friends in school, the awkward looking paintings made by her, and the painting of Soni done in the first days of their marriage. All that made her feel as though she was drunk and her head was reeling.

Then staring at the four walls she felt as if she could not breathe. She got up quickly and switched on four or five light-bulbs in the room. The room was flooded with light and she found that could breathe easily. Then her eyes fell on the timepiece kept in the closet; she was not sure whether it was twelve or one in the night. When she kept her eyes fixed on the dial for some time, its hands began to fade gradually. She could not see the time even in such bright light. She was feeling restless as if something was rising within her. When she found it difficult to lie down she went into the courtyard. The moon was overhead. Looking at it, she was reminded of the night five years ago when forgetting herself she had begun to dance. The memory of that night thrilled her. She had seen such a cold and bright moonlit night after years (or perhaps, after a complete lifetime). Today also she felt like dancing. She felt a shiver go through her shoulders, arms, fingers and breasts. She stood there for some time, gazing at the 'half' moon like a *chakori*.

After some time the bright moonlight began to look green, but it was the green of the slightly dry grass. Then the cold made her shiver. She folded her arms tightly over her breasts and came back into the room. She lay down on the bed and put the quilt over her, but the shivering did not go for a long time. After a while when she felt a bit

warmer, she removed the quilt from her face and looked all around her as if she was in an unknown place. Then all her limbs began to feel lifeless, and when she tilted her neck to the left, it remained there. On the wall in front of her she saw black spots and when they began to swim before her eyes, she closed her eyes. After some time she felt drops of tears trickling down her cheeks, tears hot as fire.

It had grown colder. In the courtyard, the shrill cry of a cricket was heard, and when it stopped, there was a frightening silence.

...Then, she did not know when, she felt that someone was moving stealthily in the street and approaching the door. She sat up nervously. Then she felt as if someone had stopped in front of the door. But after that, when no sound of knocking came, her heart began to beat fast; and feeling a pain in the chest, she pressed her breasts. She was waiting for a sound from the door; and the whistling sound in her ears grew so much that even if someone had knocked, she would not have heard it.

...When the beating of her heart slowed down a bit, she felt that someone was tapping at the door with his fingers. Once again her heart began to beat faster, and there was darkness before her eyes. When she recognized the knocking at the door, tears like fire began to flow from eyes. This was the fifth time that Gurkeert Singh, a friend of Amar Singh, had come so late in the night. When Amar Singh was here, he would come once or twice in a week. Soni did not dislike the manner in which he looked at her. He was a very handsome young man: tall with bluish eyes. Soni felt disturbed when she saw him looking at her. She

thought: why should she fear such a man? But after Amar Singh left for the capital, whenever he came, she did not know why she never liked it. (But strangely enough, she did not entirely dislike it either). But why does he come so late in the night? She understood the reason for it, and yet she pretended not to understand it. (Or, perhaps, she did not want to understand it).

Once again she heard the knocking at the door. Perhaps this time he was knocking the door with both his hands.

Soni felt flames rising in her chest. In the last two years, this fire in her seemed to have increased. She felt as if that fire would burn her golden body into ash; as gunpowder turns everything into ash. This 'strange hunger' would tear at her flesh with large, sharp claws, and then she felt she could not stand the burning pain any longer.

The knocking at the door had become louder. Soni threw the quilt towards her feet and stood up quickly. The burning sensation in her eyes seemed to torch her entire body and again when the knocking was heard, there was darkness before her eyes... Then she felt weak and unable to move. Her legs began to tremble and she fell on the bed.

...Then there was only a soft knocking at the door, and after that all around her a dense silence began to grow.

SHE did not know how late it was in the night when she heard the sound of knocking once again. Startled, she stood up and in the glare of four or five light-bulbs; she could not open her eyes. She felt dizzy.

"Soni, Soni! Ambi! Mana!," he spoke in a single breath and was knocking the door hard, as if he would break it.

With her legs trembling, and guiding herself with the help of the wall, she reached the door and unlocked it.

"I went mad calling you; the neighbours also have woken up but I don't know in which cave you were sleeping that you did not hear me," with some anger in his voice but smiling as ever Amar Singh said. Entering the house he himself closed the door and putting down his bag continued, "Didn't you get my letter? May be you forgot. It doesn't matter. I too am late."

Slumping onto the bed he untied his shoelaces and with "O, I'm tired, Oh ho," he lay down on the quilt exactly where Soni had been lying some time ago.

"It's so late in the night..." standing before him and trying to smile Soni said, but she could say nothing else.

"Actually I missed my bus. Then I thought, I have to go because I have promised you! So there at the petrol station I got a tanker that was coming this way. We left at ten in the night and stopping at different places reached here now. Don't ask me how bad the journey has been...", he said and began to laugh the way he always did. Once he looked at Soni with great love in his eyes, but he was too tired to get up and come close to her.

"Listen, why don't you put this quilt over me and then come and lie here beside me. I think I'll feel less tired if I get some sleep, or else..."

He seemed to fall asleep even while he was saying that. Very gently, Soni pulled the quilt from under him, covered him with it, switched off all the lights, and lay down with

her daughters. Once again, tears welled up in her dry and burning eyes. She did not know when or how the night ended.

SHE noticed the light streaming into the room from the courtyard. Getting up quickly she came out. Dawn had broken. She went into the other room and woke Maakhi up and sent him to fetch milk. Suddenly her eyes fell on the large mirror and she was shocked. It seemed to be someone else's face. When she came closer, she felt as if she was not able to breathe. When were her eyes so deep-set and so horrible looking? When did those dark spots appear under her eyes? And those two lines running from her nose to the corners of her lips? And those lines on her forehead...? And when she ran her fingers through her hair she saw a few grey strands in them.

Her legs grew weak under her and she felt as if she would not be able to stand any longer. She could not walk even to the three chairs kept on the other side. Steadying herself against the dressing table, she collapsed to the ground. Now her face was below the mirror, so she could not see it. Feeling sick, she rested her head on her knees between her arms and pressed it, feeling as if it was going to split. When it became difficult to sit like that, she rolled on to one side with her shoulder against the wall. She remained in that position till Maakhi returned. Then she got up and walked towards the kitchen; she felt that her whole body was burning with high fever. When she was coming out of the room, she wanted to look at her face in

the mirror one more time, but she did not have the heart to do it.

It was quite late but Amar Singh was still asleep. After boiling water for the tea, she began to sweep the room that Amar Singh had once called his studio. But more than two years had passed since then; and now his brushes and colour tubes were locked in the cupboard. Now, there was a big sofa, a large divan and also a long table there. Its windows opened on the street. When he came home, he would open the windows and draw the curtains. Through the window-grill he could see people passing by on the street. If he saw a familiar face, he would call him in and talk to him, asking Soni to make tea.

"Aunty, please leave all this. Take your bath; I'll clean this place," entering the room when Maakhi said it, Soni suddenly remembered that there were many things left to be done still.

She woke her two daughters up, washed their faces with warm water that had been heated for making tea, and changed their dresses. And then she heated water, bathed, took off the pink suit she had worn the previous night and put on a very simple dress. She combed her hair with the comb kept in the bathroom (she could not bear to go before the dressing table). When she went into the kitchen and began to heat water for the second time, she did not know when the younger Mana went into the bedroom and woke her papa. Mana was lying next to him and Amar Singh was smiling, laughing and talking to her; but what he was saying she could not hear from that distance. But the elder Ambi stood near the door and

listened to what papa and Mana were saying. What strange hesitation was there in her large eyes that she could never enter the room unless she was asked to!

"Arre, you also come here," Amar Singh called her when he saw her standing there.

With her thumb in her mouth and taking small steps, walking and stopping and then walking again, when Ambi came near her papa, Amar Singh picked her up and sat her on his other side. When he began to talk to her, Ambi only shook her head; she could not say anything because of the thumb in her mouth.

"O, you are only shaking your head like a fool," Amar Singh said in a voice heavy with sleep, "See how young Mana is talking. How clever she has become! All right, tell me this, does your mummy scold you or love you?"

But still Ambi did not say anything.

"Come on, say something," placing his hand on her head he was trying to make her say something, but she remained silent.

When he saw that Ambi was not saying anything, he did not know why the thought came to him that Soni herself was responsible for that condition of the girl at such a young age. But after a few moments, forgetting all that, he once again began to talk to Mana. He began to praise the neckties, skirts, beautifully trimmed hair and shining shoes of the students of convent schools in the capital.

"Now, next year we'll get you also admitted there... We'll leave Ambi here. She is mad!" with the younger daughter lying on his chest, when he said that he heard Soni's voice, "Now get up; it's nine now. I've already heated

the water for tea so many times!" Saying that when she came in, she saw the two daughters with him and said, "When did these wicked ones come here?"

"Arre don't speak like this," Amar Singh smiled, but pretending to show anger said, "I'll admit them to an English medium school in the capital. Then I'll send them to Paris, London, New York to become big artists!"

Amar Singh got up, and gathering his hair into a knot said, "This year itself we'll get Ambi admitted there. There is also a hostel for small children, I've seen it. There are children like flowers and ..."

"Okay, okay, first get up and wash yourself and then take her to Paris and London! I don't need them here to grind wheat," turning her head Soni replied, and it was not clear why Ambi suddenly began to titter.

"Arre, now what has happened to you, foolish girl?" Arranging his hair, Amar Singh also began to laugh. "Will you like to see a wheat-grinder? Today I'll show it to you; it's safely kept in the store. It belongs to our grandfather's time. Do you know who grandfather was?"

But Ambi again put her thumb into her mouth and became silent.

Holding the younger daughter in his arms when he came barefoot into the kitchen to have his tea, Soni looked at him from top to toe and was shocked. He had never looked so weak. The face had shrunk so much that only eyes seemed to be there on it. The forehead had become dark in the sun. There were wrinkles on the back of his hands. He seemed shorter and when she saw grey hairs in his beard, she was too shocked to say anything.

Carrying Mana in his arms when he was going back to his room, Maakhi came and touched his feet. He said with surprise, "Arre, where were you till now? I didn't see you!"

"I was around, uncle; you were asleep."

"Wah! Well said...yes, indeed I was sleeping. I came very late in the night... rather in the morning, that's why I could not get up early."

And going into his room he seemed to forget everything. Mana was sitting on his arm and he held the cup of tea in one hand and sipped from it. One by one, he began to see his paintings he had made years ago; and at that moment he looked like some famous painter of the country, or rather like the Dutch painter Van Gogh whose talent had remained unrecognized. (He had purchased an album of Van Gogh's paintings for the school library, in which there was some description of the forlorn life of the painter. Though he could not make much sense of those paintings, he felt that there was something common between his and Van Gogh's life).

Then, Soni came in; and taking Mana from him said, "Drink your tea peacefully, and then you can play with her."

Looking at her face and smiling, Amar Singh said, "You're looking very beautiful today, what's the matter?"

And he handed Mana to her.

"Today you were coming, weren't you?," when hiding her pain Soni said with a touch of sarcasm, he laughed loudly; and when he sat down on the sofa, some of the tea spilled on to his trousers but he paid no attention to it.

"All right, sit on that bed in front of me. Let me at least take a good look at you!"

When he laughed again, Soni's eyes suddenly brimmed with tears. She turned her face away and wiping it with her chunni, stood silently there for some time. Then as he had told her, she sat down on the divan in front of him and began to smile. (Perhaps for her toy-like husband, she had learnt the art of changing her mood from moment to moment.)

"Okay, tell me, how your work is going," Soni asked.

"My work? Don't talk about my work. There's so much of it...and there's lots of money! Big blue currency notes."

Then, Heaven only knows how long he kept talking about his work! All the while Soni sat in front of him and smiled, but she herself knew how faded her smile was. (In his excitement about his work, Amar Singh did not notice that Soni's smile was no longer as beautiful as it had been in the past). He went on talking incessantly. Soni listened to him but without understanding anything. She felt that like the face of Amar Singh, his words, sentences, voice and everything else had also changed like a dry *peepal* leaf. (When she was a young girl, she would take those very tender and small *peepal* leaves that people called 'papeesis' and would fold them and blow into them to produce a whistling sound. How she liked them! When she was a bit older she would collect the wilted leaves of that tree, bring them home but where she stored them she could not recall now. She only knew that those same 'papeesis' one day became leaves, and that is why she brought them home).

When he had finished his tea, Amar Singh seemed to

remember something. Immediately he went to the bedroom, put on his shoes and turban, and went out. After two or three hours when he returned, there was a heavy bag in his hand and another on his shoulder. He was panting. Without waiting, he opened the bags and took out all kinds of things from them. For Soni there were five or six cotton and silk suits and woollen shawls of many varieties. And there was a heap of clothes and toys for the children.

"From where have you brought all this?" Soni asked in surprise.

"In the night—no, in the morning when I was coming home I had left all this at the Grewal Petrol Pump. Now when I remembered it, I have brought them. What could not get into these bags I have left with Mitthu. I'll bring them the next time I come. If I get some foreign goods, I'll bring them too," he said laughing.

Both the daughters began to play with the toys, among which there was a pup that ran on a key. Ambi picked it up and took it into another room, and when after turning the key, she left it on the floor, it began to run on its four legs, opening and closing its jaws. Then the younger Mana picked it up and took it to her papa. Ambi came running behind and tried to snatch it from her. Both began to quarrel. Amar Singh gave a number of toys to each of them, then they were happy and went into the room at the back and Maakhi began to play with them. In the bedroom only Amar Singh and Soni were left now.

"Look here, this box is for you, it is completely full...see!" Amar Singh handed her a beautiful hexagonal box on which flower-designs of many colours were printed,

but Soni put it aside without opening it.

"Come on, open it and see what's inside; everything in it is imported. It has cost me two hundred and fifty rupees!"

When Soni still did not open the box, he himself opened it and began to show it to her, "See, here is nail polish and lipsticks of so many different colours. And this cream and this powder, they have a lovely scent...and this small brush, apply some powder with this puff...!"

When with the help of the silken puff he applied a little powder on the left cheek of Soni, she immediately wiped it off with her chunni and said, "What childishness is this? I don't need all this."

And she stood up. Amar Singh held her in his arms and said, "Wah! This is strange. I've brought all this for you and you..."

"You keep it. I have to do the cooking now; because of you, no one has eaten."

"Why should you all remain hungry because of me? You know I do not believe in the idea that the wife should feed the husband first and then eat. And why did you keep the children hungry? All these are stupid, old and useless ideas."

Soni did not say anything and went into the kitchen. Putting all those things on the table, he began to speak as if he was talking to the air:

"It is really funny, you carry so much from so far and no one is ready to take even a look at it. If she does not like it, what else can a man bring! Arre, I have bought these things from the biggest shop in the city, and she is not ready to touch it! It is ridiculous...it is as if the goat gave

its life, but the diner did not enjoy the meat! What else is it? This is what it is!”

And talking like this he went into the kitchen and with a smile said, “If you have some leftover bread, give it to me. I am very hungry.”

“Just wait for five minutes only; I am cooking breakfast.”

But he picked two chapattis from the plastic box and like a child rolled them and began to eat. And smiling and laughing like that he went out saying, “For me these are really the *parathas**... See, I have to go to the market now; and if I get late, don’t wait for me. And I have also to return by the evening bus. If I don’t get the bus, I’ve talked to a truck-driver, he’ll take me.”

Soni could not bear to look at him. While she was cooking the vegetables, kneading the dough, rolling the chapattis, the tears in her eyes never stopped. It was as if all the water held back for years was ready to flow out of her eyes.

* Pancakes

Six

THE boys were busy in work. But because of the pain in his shoulder, Amar Singh had taken some medicine and was sitting on a chair watching the passersby. The pain was bothering him but he somehow tried to ignore it. Then he noticed a boy of about twelve or thirteen who had crossed the shop twice while trying to peer into it. He had an innocent face, his clothes were old, and a dirty turban was wrapped round his head, the kind Amar Singh himself wore when he was a child.

When for the third time he saw the boy walking past the shop from left to right, he called Mittu Miyan busy in work, "Mittu, a boy has just passed by to the right, go and bring him to me. Run or you will lose him."

Putting the brush aside Mittu ran out and soon returned holding the boy by the arm as if he were a thief.

"Here he is, *ustad jee!*"

Amar Singh saw that the face of the boy had gone pale with fear.

“Well, son, what were you looking at here?,” Amar Singh asked.

His eyes wide, the boy said nothing. He looked sometimes at him and sometimes at the boards and paintings kept in the shop.

“Arre, are you deaf or dumb? Why don’t you speak?”

The boy lowered his eyes, but said nothing.

“What’s your name?”

“Shama,” with his head still bent the boy replied.

“What do you do?”

“Nothing.”

“Nothing...? Don’t you even go to a school?”

The boy lowered his eyes again. When Amar Singh saw his rustic manners, hesitant behaviour and the scared look on his face, pity entered his soul. He stepped forward and when he held his hand, he found that it was shaking.

“All right, tell me from where have you come?,” Amar Singh asked, and his own voice seemed to be trembling.

“From here only...”

“From here? Where is ‘here’?”

The boy remained silent.

“All right, where will you spend the night?”

“Here...”

“Where are your parents?”

“In the village.”

“What is the name of your village?”

“Golewala.”

Then the boy raised his eyes as if he had been cheated into revealing a secret he was trying to hide.

"All right, tell me, can you do any work?"

"Yes, I can make button-holes and can also sew."

Amar Singh burst into laughter. (At that moment, the boy pulled his hand free).

"So loafing on the road all this while what were you looking at?"

"Paintings."

"You like them?"

The boy only nodded and again lowered his eyes.

"If I teach you how to paint pictures like these, will you work with us?"

"Jee, I'll work."

For the first time, when Amar Singh heard the word 'jee' from him, he smiled and then began to laugh.

"Come with me," holding his arm he took him out of the shop.

Then turning to Sultan Akbar he asked him to bolt the door and taking a rickshaw from the nearby crossing he took Shama with him. Slowly the boy revealed that his father was a big drunkard. When drunk, he would also beat his mother, brothers and sisters. When the boy could not bear that beating, he ran away from home. With him there was another boy from his village. For a few days they wandered from one small town to another, and then came to the capital some three or four days ago. A day later, the other boy left him and went somewhere else. For two days he had been roaming about hungry.

"Where did you sleep these two days?"

When the boy could not answer that question, Amar Singh fell silent. But when he saw his innocence and his

hapless condition he understood everything. And when he began to think about that 'orphan', a sigh escaped him. (Grandfather used to tell many stories about orphan children). He looked at him closely and he felt as if the boy presented his own image. He was wearing oversized, dusty slippers. His kurta and pyajama were dirty and he had a faded red turban wrapped round his head. The sleeves of the kurta were torn at the elbows. Dust covered his clothes and it looked very dirty.

When they reached home, he asked the boy to go to the bathroom and take a bath; and then, he gave him Mittu Miyan's clean clothes and asked him to put them on. When Shama came out wearing those clothes, for some time he was surprised to see how different the boy looked. His fair complexion was glowing like the moon. Probably the boy had not washed his hair for many weeks and so they looked like the matted locks of some *sadhu*. He gave him a large comb and asked him to comb his hair. First he gave him one of his old turbans, then a thought struck him, and seating him on a chair, he himself began to tie the turban around the boy's head. He felt that on that day, it was the best time he had spent. Whatever he had done for the boy seemed to be meaningful to him. That was the reason why he had forgotten the pain in his shoulder.

A few moments later, the sound of a motorcycle was heard and Mitthu came in whistling and humming some song. (After he got a contract for writing milestones on the highway, he had purchased a motorcycle also). When his eyes fell on that unknown boy, in the beginning, he seemed a bit surprised, and then began to consider him as

if he were an animal with five eyes that had descended on the earth from some other world.

"From where have you brought this specimen, master?" Mitthu asked in a manner that suggested that he was slightly drunk.

"He is like one of us. Like us, he has also run away from home because he was beaten there. And moreover, he belongs to our region."

"Really?" placing his hand on his knee Mitthu looked at the boy with dangerous looking eyes and said, "Then he too belongs to our clan. But, my friend, he does not look like a human child; I would say he is closer to an owl's son."

Guffawing Mitthu went into his room. Amar Singh did not like it at all. But then that's what Mitthu was like. It was surely not the first time that he had behaved like that; Amar Singh thought and did not say anything.

After some time Mittu Miyan also returned from the shop. Throwing a glance at the new boy he went into the kitchen smiling. There he put water for tea on the stove and then going into Mitthu's room enquired, "Will you have tea, *ustad jee*?"

"You bloody son of a monkey, don't you know that in the evening, this man, who is your father, which means he is the husband of your mother from the mountains, does not take tea, then why do you ask him?"

Sheepishly Mittu returned. When the tea was ready he brought two cups, one for Amar Singh and the other for the boy. When the boy held the cup with both his hands like a tumbler, Mittu only smiled from a distance.

"Is the sugar all right?" Amar Singh asked Shama.

But Shama did not follow what he was asked. He simply looked at Amar Singh with wide-open eyes, as if someone else had asked him the question.

"Well, I have forgotten your name, what's it?"

"Jee, Shama."

"It sounds all right to me."

The boy nodded his head but did not say anything.

"Now, you will stay with us, won't you?"

"Yes, jee?"

"Arre, will you stay with us in this house or not?"

"Yes, jee."

"Yes, jee. That's the spirit! After some time we'll make you also a big artist. Then you can forget all about making button-holes. Then you can go to the nearby Faridkot, open a shop there, and have a nice time. Getting work there won't be a problem. After all, you will be our student. Do you follow what I am saying?"

Indeed Shama did not understand anything. He only looked at his '*ustad jee*' and sipped tea as if he had been brought to a 'fairy's palace' of his dreams.

WHEN Mittu Miyan brought *dal*, vegetables and chappatis for the *ustad jee*, he was told, "First feed this brother of yours; I'll eat a little later. Now I am going out for a walk."

Mittu placed that plate in front of Shama. First he looked around him and then asked Mittu, "Was it meant for me?"

"Arre, no, it was for big *ustad jee*, but he has gone for a

walk, so now you can eat it, all right?"

Shama was still in doubt and was thinking whether the plate was really meant for him. He had never eaten off such a brightly shining plate in which there were separate bowls for *dal* and vegetables; he had not even seen anything like that before. But when after placing the plate on the small table in front of him Mittu returned, and *ustad jee* too had left the room; what could he do? He was hungry for he hadn't eaten for two days.

Ravenously, he picked up a chapatti, tore it into four pieces, and ate them one by one in the same manner as, snatching food from all the weaker dogs in the street, that big dog ate it in a matter of seconds. Bobbing his head up and down exactly like that black dog, he ate all the remaining three chapattis in a matter of minutes. Much before that, he had polished off the bowl of vegetables. There was some *dal* left in the bowl; he picked it up and drank it all. Then picking up the tumbler he drank the water in only two or three gulps, and felt some tightness in his stomach. He got up from the chair, and opening his mouth wide, belched, and then looked out of the house with frightened eyes.

"Do you need any more chapattis?" coming into the room at that moment Mittu asked.

"No, it's enough." Turning towards him Shama said, but he still felt hungry.

"Then can I clear the table?"

"Yes."

"Now will you sleep?"

"Yes."

“Then lie down here. *Ustad jee* has put that bed in the corner for guests only. You can lie down there.”

Without saying anything else, Shama went to the bed and lay on it and soon he was fast asleep.

MITTU had a great deal left to do. Big *ustad jee* had gone for a walk; and he did not know when he would return. When he came back, Mittu would have to heat *dal* and vegetables and then serve him dinner. And the junior *ustad* never ate his dinner when he left his motorcycle outside like that, and went straight to his room. Now he had to drag in the motorcycle into the room also. Only when the big *ustad* came, he brought it inside; he could not do it alone. It was so heavy that if it fell over even a strong man, he would not be able to come out from under it. That is why switching on the lights of the veranda, Mittu stood there looking towards the road, and waited for the big *ustad*.

That was usually the time when Mittu Miyan thought of home. His home – Kangra – was a much more beautiful place than this. He remembered how, when it rained there, bright pearl-like drops rolled down each leaf of the thick-leaved bushes and dripped on the ground, and how the tall, sky-kissing pine trees swayed in the strong wind. And far away from those trees, was his small village: cottages with wet and fragile roofs, sitting on one another's shoulders like matchboxes, the way the lamb sat on his shoulders, when he picked it up and singing to it, brought it home. He could not understand why at those moments of reverie he always felt sad. But he knew that he could not leave

this place and run back home. The little money, which he sent by money order to his mother back in the village, was the only way in which his three brothers and sisters could get two meals a day. After his father's death, his mother said to him, "Now my son Mittu, you are our only support. Your two younger brothers and your little sister can't earn anything. Your sister has to be married, from where will the money for it come? After all, there will be at least some expense on her marriage."

It was for that reason that he was there, and at those moments, strolling about the veranda, he would remember a song that people sang in his village; the song came to him wafting like the strains of the flute that Dasu Bhai played in his village. Whenever he hummed that song, he felt greatly nostalgic for his village. And then, he began to sing the song loudly, and at the far end of the road, stretching into the distance, emerged his village: sometimes he even forgot where he was and began to walk on that road towards his village—half-asleep and half-lost. But then at that moment the abuses of junior *ustad* Mitthu reached his ears. And forgetting the song he ran into the veranda panting. That happened many times, again and again, but he was never able to run away to his village. He had not seen a real jail, but had heard from people in his village that it had such high walls around it that one could not scale them even with the help of a big ladder. If someone really acted brave and took the risk, the sentries posted on the high walls fired bullets at him. That is why every prisoner had to remain within those walls, till the period of his imprisonment was over. That is what people said.

“Have I also been imprisoned like that?” he sometimes thought, but got no answer to his question.

“O you bloody owl! Where are you going?”

Mittu raised his head and saw *ustad jee* standing in front of him. (At other times too, when he was walking on that road to his imaginary village at the far end, Mittu ran into him like that. But the *ustad* was never angry with him. That day also, he did not say anything to him; he was such a good man).

“Remembering your mother?” placing his hand on his shoulder and then putting his left arm around him he said, “Don’t you worry. This time I’ll also go to your village with you. I have never seen the mountains. I will see them with you. I’ll also meet your brothers and sisters and your mother, and then I’ll tell them that Mittu is my son, the son of a great painter!”

“Really, *ustad jee*? Will you come?”

“Yes, I’ll certainly come.” When he smiled, Mittu noticed the gap in his front teeth and he too began to smile. (People said that a man with such teeth is very lucky and has a lot of wealth. Sometimes Mittu watched his teeth in the mirror and noticed that he too had a little gap between them. It made him feel happy that one day he too would become rich.)

And then suddenly he came back to the present.

“Big *ustad jee*, first of all please help me to bring the motorcycle inside, and then I’ll warm the dinner for you. By now you must be very hungry.”

Ustad jee only laughed.

IT was past midnight. On the corner bed Shama was fast asleep. His turban had slipped to the ground exposing his dishevelled hair. In the blue light of the small bulb, Shama's face looked very beautiful. Lying on his bed, Amar Singh watched him for a long time and then turned on his back and began to look at the moving ceiling fan. He did not know how things which had happened years ago began to flash across his mind, as if the entire scene were played out before him.

...Then he must have been younger than Shama. Tired of the beatings and abuses of his father, he left home. He reached an old fort covering a vast area and visible from a distance of ten or fifteen *kos*. It was said to be hundreds of years old. On both sides of the fort, there were rows of mud and brick houses, and in one of them lived Baba Milkha. Amar Singh came across him in the same manner as that simple and devoted farmer Dhanna had met his God: with the help of a piece of stone given to him by a Brahmin.

Scores of times he had heard those simple stories of Dhanna Bhagat. It went like this: some sage had told Dhanna that in order to reach God; he should worship his Lord's stone idol. As Dhanna did not have an idol of the Lord, he went to a Brahmin in his village and requested him to give him an idol. The Brahmin thought, "He is an idiot, so how can an idol of the Lord be given to him? One has to bring it from Hardwar after paying a good price for it." So he gave him a piece of stone that was used to grind spices. Dhanna began to worship it. For two days he cooked the meal, and placing it before the piece of stone said, "Lord,

please eat this, and then only I will eat." When for three days, the Lord did not eat Dhanna's food; he too had to go hungry. On the fourth day the Lord thought, "If it goes on like this, the poor farmer will die of hunger." So he emerged out of that piece of stone and ate the food offered to him. Dhanna was overjoyed. After the Lord had eaten, he asked Dhanna, "My devotee, ask what you will!" Dhanna said, "See Lord, I have very little land, so I could not marry. And therefore, I have no son to help me. I myself have to take my cattle to the pasture. I have two cows, and they have two calves. I take them to the pasture everyday. They are my only source of livelihood. I am tired of looking after them, so the first thing I want you to do is to take my cows to the pasture everyday. Now that you have come, I can have some rest."

The Lord took his cows and calves to the pasture. Dhanna went to the Brahmin to thank him.

The Brahmin asked him, "Where is the Lord?"

"Jee, he has taken the cattle to the pasture."

The Brahmin was surprised to hear that. With Dhanna he went running to the pasture. There he did not see the Lord, but only the cows and the calves.

The Brahmin asked him, "Arre, where is the Lord?"

Dhanna replied, "Look there, don't you see Him following the cattle with a stick in his hand?"

When the Brahmin could not see the Lord, he went back abusing the poor man. Dhanna only laughed after him and shouted to him, "Pandit jee, tomorrow your Lord will plough my land; come and watch Him."

Then the Lord asked Dhanna, "I will send some god to

mind your cattle. Now tell me, what more do you want?"
Joining his palms together Dhanna said, "My Lord!

*Ek bhains mango laveri,
Ek tajan turi changeri
Ek ghar ki geehan changi
Jan Dhanna leve mangi."**

"So be it!" said the Lord and disappeared. In a flash, there was a buffalo of a very good breed standing in the courtyard. An Arab mare with a beautiful and good woman riding on it also appeared. The Brahmin, and everyone else in the village, was surprised with that, but not Dhanna. If anyone wanted to know why he had asked for that much only, he replied, "Arre brother, if like the Brahmin I had asked for wealth or a kingdom, the Lord would certainly have refused it. But to start a family, I asked him to give me only a buffalo, a mare and a wife; so the Lord has given them to me. Next, I will ask him to send a god to take care of my cattle. I am still young, and so for ten or twelve years I can myself look after my cattle. By that time, and by the grace of God, my son will be old enough to do the work; and then I'll have no worries."

It was a strange story. In his life too, Amar Singh had received whatever he had wished for. And all that happened to him because of Baba Milkha and his grandfather. After all, for him those two men were no less than the Lord in a different form. When after wandering from one place to

* Lord, please give me a milch buffalow,
And a mare of the Arabian breed,
And a good-natured wife,
Dhanna asks only for these.

another, he reached Baba Milkha, the first thing he said to him was: "Do only this, my son: just follow my words, and the Lord will give everything to you."

And till that day, everything had happened the way Amar Singh wanted it. And in future also, he was sure that Baba's words would prove to be true. Baba was really God for him who always said, "Look here my son, can God himself come to every one? No. So He has put his light into each one of us. But if like an owl, a person cannot see that light, it is his own fault; what can God do then? Yes, just think, what option does the poor Lord have in that situation?"

From that day, Amar Singh began to really 'think'; he began to pay attention to profit and loss. Baba was a 'businessman'. He always had some money in his pocket. His 'business' was to go from street to street and buy wheat-bran, old newspapers, books, empty bottles, cans and canisters. In the beginning he went alone; then he took his Amru along, who was like a son to him. His income doubled. Baba had no family, so he considered half his income to be Amru's and kept that money in an iron safe in the small room at the back, and always carried in his shirt-pocket the big key of the safe. The whole night long he would tell Amru interesting stories and share many secrets with him. It was because of that teaching of Baba that at the age of thirty or thirty-five Amar Singh had achieved everything in life.

"Listen my son, this *maya* is only a form of the divine. The day man comes into this world he is caught in this web of *maya*, in the same way as a fly is caught in a spider-

web. After that freedom comes to the fly only when the spider eats it up. That is the only truth. This *maya* is difficult to get, but it is a source of all comfort. Happiness is nothing without *maya*...Look at a worker and a farmer, the poor fellow works day and night. If a worker gets work one day and not the next, he will starve. The farmer will first have to plough the land, then sow the seeds and then wait for the rains. If the rains come at the right time, he will have a good crop, otherwise there will be famine. That is why business is the best profession. See, in business, you invest twenty or thirty rupees and make double or triple that amount. *Maya* attracts *maya*. It is said

*Maya ko maya mile, kar kar lambe hath,
Tulsidas garib ki, koi na puchhe baat.**

“My son, poverty is a curse. I have also seen it. Now that I have begun this—this business—I am very happy. When God saw that Baba is old now, he has sent you to me. All this is due to God’s grace. He is there in the mind of every living thing; but no one can understand his mysterious doings.”

And only God knows what other secrets of life Baba had told him that changed his entire life, as if he had undergone a ‘*kayakalp*’**.

The night Baba wanted to leave, he lay down on his cot after dinner and said, “My son, one day I’ll have to go. When that happens, do not stay back in this place. Go to

* Money earns money with generous hands,
Tulsidas says: no one cares about a poor man.

** Metamorphosis or a complete change in life.

some other town. From today, this key to the safe will be with you. Who knows which breath will be my last? When I am gone, lock this house. When you are grown up, you can sell this house, or construct a new one for yourself. By then, you will have become a big man. Then this house will not suit you. Again, it is also close to a mountain-like fort. One does not know whether the fort is one thousand years old or two thousand years old. In the rains, one or the other watchtower of this fort always crumbles down. If some day the watchtower on this side falls; all the surrounding houses will be destroyed. A large number of people will also die. These forts and palaces of kings kill many people when they are being constructed. Whoever lives close to a fort or a palace of a king will surely be killed one day. Now you follow what I am saying...? See, one has to live with powerful people, but those who are close to them die before others. They have to die. This is the law of nature. If you are close to a king, you will have good food and good clothes, something that people living away from him will never get. But when these 'king's men' finish their quota of eating and wearing good clothes, their account is squared. Then they have to die. You understand? So, whenever a person's account is squared, he has to leave everything behind, and go."

From him Amar Singh had learnt a great deal about the world. Before he was ten, Baba had taught him more than what another person learns in twenty or thirty years. But a number of times, it so happened that Baba would not 'leave' even after preparing for it. After leading such a successful 'businessman's' life, who would like to leave this

world? And at night, lying on his cot, Baba would sing this song:

*Jado pugg gayi aundh tan chithi ghar dargahon auni hai!
 Odon kise na dekhni rut harhi hai ki sauni hai.
 Wich gadele de tan chumdi rarak bareven di
 Seja teri lakro gohiya di vanauni hai.
 Tera jee nee oye karna bhariya mela chharne nun
 Par jam ne sir naubat aa bajauni hai.
 Tun aankhega, do din, hor we mela dekhan diyo
 Par hukum de badhe jam ne chithi tere hath pharauni hai
 Tarle karda, ronda maar dhahan pachhtavegan
 Phala kutti da jiyon, ohna khoop lagauni dhauni hai.
 Kel karende hanjh nun jad aa bajan ne paina hai
 Chak-lo chak-lo hoju jadon bhaur udari launi hai.**

-
- * When your time in this world is up, a letter will come from above,
 Then no one will ask what season it is;
 Now, you sleep on a mattress and even the cotton seeds in it
 pierce you,
 But after death, your bed will be made of wood and dry cow-
 dung,
 The messengers of death will wait for you,
 And you will say to them—let me watch this beautiful fair for
 two days more,
 But they will hand over to you the letter they have brought from
 Death,
 You will plead with them, cry and scream, and also repent,
 But they will beat you as a blacksmith beats hot iron with a
 hammer,
 When like a crane you will be playing with fish, the eagle will
 come and pluck your neck,
 When the honey-bee (the soul) flies away from your body, they
 will only say—Lift him, lift him, and cremate him soon.

Then one day, quite late at night, Baba took out numerous small and big currency notes and coins from the safe in the back room, tied them in a piece of cloth, and giving that bundle to him said, "Before sunrise catch the train to Ferozepur that leaves at five in the morning. In this bundle are your earnings—the profit from the business. Lock it carefully in your box. You can return to your village, or go to some other place, wherever you want to go. Do not tell anyone about this bundle. If you have the money, you can start a business. Otherwise you will have to be someone's servant."

After a pause Baba said in a low voice, "I have only one wish, do fulfil it. The day I die, come back to light my funeral pyre. Now in this wide world, you are the only one I have."

Amar Singh was sad. Sleep came to him very late that night. That night Baba taught him many other useful things but his mind was elsewhere. When the cock crowed, Baba said to him, "Get up, my son, it's time to go."

But he was already awake. He picked up his old trunk and after touching Baba's feet prepared to leave. Baba blessed him again, "May you be happy. May you grow and prosper! Let your coffers be full of *maya*. May you be successful in whatever business you start!" And Baba came to see him off up to the wall of the fort. When he turned back, Baba began to wipe his tears with the end of his turban. Several times Amar Singh looked back, sometimes he paused also, but he did not forget Baba's instructions. His head bent, he continued to walk to the railway station.

IT was a small town and people in that area called it *mandi*. In that town lived his *mamu*, though he was a distant relation. He was a tailor. He was not very clear about where his uncle lived. His name he remembered though, which was Phangan Singh. So asking around, he managed to reach his house. Phangan Singh's wife was at home; though she did not recognize him she allowed him to come in. She also offered him tea, and some breakfast. By the time Phangan Singh returned, his wife had sent Amar Singh to Vaidya Gurmukh Singh, who lived nearby. The *vaidya* was seventy and a very good man. He needed a strong and intelligent boy to powder the medicinal herbs. He had a slightly suspicious nature; so several boys came to work for him, but no one stayed long with him.

"From where do you come, my son?"

"Jee, at the moment I am coming from Bhatinda."

"I mean, what's the name of your native village?"

"My parents, brothers and sisters belong to a village called Pipli near Ferozepur, jee."

"What do they do?"

"Jee, they stitch clothes."

"So you are the son of a tailor."

"Yes, jee. My father's name is Kartar Singh, jee. We came from Pakistan. But I was born in this country. I don't know when Pakistan was created."

The *vaidyaraj* looked at him from top to toe and then asked, "What is your *gotra*?"

"Jee, I don't know that but my mother used to say that her father's *gotra* was Saggu, jee."

"Saggu!" he looked at him with some surprise and said

with a smile, "Then she becomes my daughter; our *gotra* is also Saggu. Have you been to a school?"

"Jee, I have passed class five."

"And ran away from home," the *vaidya* seemed to know everything beforehand. He continued, "Put that trunk of yours in the back-room. Then go to the kitchen, where there is a stove on the left. You will also find some milk there. Heat that milk, and drink a glass of it. Then come back to me for work."

Amar Singh did as he was told. When he returned after some time the *vaidya* told him, "From today, you may call me 'grandfather'. Now take this mortar and pestle and put into it the herbs kept on that small table in front of you, and then pound them to such a fine powder that they can pass through a cloth-sieve. Understood?"

"Jee, grandfather."

The *vaidya* thought, the boy was really intelligent. His body was somewhat weak but it looked hardy. He would do.

All the three items of clothing that grandfather wore were white. His beard too was white. He was fair, tall, and had an aquiline nose, and shining brown eyes. He had only to look at a thing, and he seemed to know everything about it. Grandfather's personality, the level of his knowledge and the way he behaved often reminded Amar Singh of Baba Milkha. In a few days only, he found that whatever grandfather was teaching him was very similar to what Baba Milkha had done. When Amar Singh learnt to cook the evening meal, grandfather stopped going into the kitchen. Whatever instructions he wanted to give to Amar Singh,

he gave only at night when after dinner he lay on his cot. The day would be very busy. Throughout the day there would be a stream of visitors. Scores of patients sat on wooden benches kept in the *darwaza* and Amar Singh sent them inside one by one when their turn came.

It had only been a week since Amar Singh came when grandfather called a tutor to teach him. He said to him, "Look, tutor, I'll pay you whatever fee you say, just help this grandson of mine to pass class eight. Next year, help him to pass the matriculation. Can you do it?"

"Jee, I'll do my best," the tutor said, "How far he can study will actually depend on the boy and his I.Q., which means..."

"What is this I.Q., man?" asked the *vaidya*.

"Jee, it's a measure of intelligence; it shows how good or..."

"So there are varieties of intelligence also, as we have of bricks."

"Yes, this is what we were taught during our training."

Grandfather began to laugh and said, "All right, first tell me how you will classify this boy of mine, as you classify bricks. Is he of the best kind, or the second best, or the third grade or the fourth; or is he only a burnt brick that is too hard to crack?"

The tutor came every evening to teach the boy and in three or four days only he told the *vaidya* that the boy had the intelligence of the first order. He would definitely learn fast. *Vaidya jee* was happy that such an intelligent boy had come to work for him.

Scarcely two months had passed when receiving word

from Phangan Singh, the parents of Amar Singh came to *Vaidya jee*. With them they had brought some clothes for their son and also something to eat from the market. *Vaidya jee* asked them, "Have you come to take him back?"

"No, we have only come to see you. Now, he belongs only to you, *jee*," politely joining his palms together Amar Singh's father said.

"If it's like this, take back the clothes you have brought, but leave the food in the kitchen."

The mother and father were happy to see that Amar Singh was doing well. The mother took him into her arms and showered love on him. She blessed him saying that he would become a famous *vaidya* and a prosperous man.

Vaidya Gurmukh Singh was well-known not only as a religious man but also for his being a complete celibate. The only thing he cared about in this world was to serve the poor. He never asked anyone to pay the price of medicine. But since the time Amar Singh came, he had begun to charge a fee even from his poor patients. He told them, "Brother, if you have some money, please pay my fee; and if you do not have it, you can pay me later."

Those who had known him for twenty or thirty years were a little surprised at this change, but the common people did not find anything strange in it. They knew that he was a good doctor and so it did not really matter if he charged one or two rupees for his services. They also believed that he could cure even chronic diseases in a short time.

That was not the only thing to change. Another unusual thing that happened was that now he offered less

religious teaching to Amar Singh than what he did in the early days. (Amar Singh too was surprised to notice that.)

“Look my son, in the Gurbani too the great Guru Nanak Dev jee has said, ‘*Manka jeevo pawan, patidehi, dehi deo samana.*’ It means that there is mind because there is life, and there is life because there is soul. The Supreme Being resides in the body. Then is it not necessary to look after this body also, in which God lives? And to look after this body you need the means. And money is necessary for acquiring means. If you do not have money, how will you get food and clothes? Do you understand?”

Sometimes Amar Singh did not understand him fully. There was a time when grandfather used to say “*Maya bani hai nagni jagat rahi liptai, jo iski sewa kare tis hi ko phir khai*,”*; and now he considered *maya* to be necessary for life! But he was not ready to get caught into such fine distinctions, and he still considered Baba Milkha’s advice more useful to him. Now that grandfather also gave him the same advice, how could he make a mistake in understanding it?

Following grandfather’s advice and completing his studies in three years, Amar Singh joined a training course required to become an art and crafts teacher. It was a one-year course but classes were held for seven months only. Time passed quickly. A district inspector of schools was a devotee of the grandfather. After completing his training, Amar Singh got a job in the local school on the recommendation of that inspector. He had started his career

* *Maya* is like a snake coiled round this world; it eats up the one who serves it

even before he was twenty. During his training itself, grandfather has appointed two more boys to powder and sieve the medicines.

AFTER some time when grandfather's call came, he said to Amar Singh, "Look my son, now my 'watch' will end soon. Here is my will. I have left to you this house; and everything in it, including the medicines. The moment I close my eyes, God knows how many people will come here claiming to be my brothers and nephews. Keep this paper safe; then no one will trouble you. From today, all this belongs to you."

A few days later, the *vaidya* died in his sleep. Hundreds of people assembled for the funeral and his body was taken for cremation in a procession. Devotional songs were sung. According to the custom, the funeral rites continued for ten days. Passages from the Gurugranth Sahib were recited. Then in the *bhog* ceremony people from the entire mandi, and also from the adjoining villages, came. The total expenses on the funeral rites did not exceed one fourth of the money that grandfather had left behind.

For a few days Amar Singh was sad and then locking up grandfather's medicines in a cupboard, he got the house repaired. Soon, things returned to what they had always been.

Meanwhile he thought of Baba Milkha a number of times, but could never find the time to visit him. But one day, leaving his work, he went to Baba's house, and found that some 'Pakistanis' were living in his house. He asked

them, "Where is Baba?" A man with a long nose, large eyes and a large turban said, "Do you mean Milkha? He was illegally occupying the house allotted to us, so we drove him out. It has been six or seven years since. He must have died by now. We don't know anything about him." Amar Singh felt like shouting at him. He also wanted to beat him up. He wanted to tell him who Baba was. But he did nothing. He returned without saying anything and remained depressed for a number of days. Then he remembered Baba's words, "My son, you will certainly get what Destiny has in store for you. Be ambitious, but don't open your mouth so wide that flies get into it."

After that Amar Singh got married. Now in the place of grandfather's mud house, there stood a big, brick house. In that small locality, Amar Singh had a big house. He had received more than he had hoped for. What else could he desire?

HE noticed that Shama was still fast asleep. The ceiling fan was turning fast, as if it would fall on him. Amar Singh was sweating, either because of the fear of the fan falling on him, or for some other unknown reason. When he tried to sleep, his head began to ache. He found it difficult to sleep. Finally, when he turned on his back and closed his eyes, the loud voice of Baba Milkha began to ring in his ears, "My son, do not trust anyone in money matters. Everyone is a thief here. Your relatives too are thieves. Do not trust anyone." But he had left the entire business to Mitthu. It was he who dealt with the customers. On the

second or the third of every month, he gave Amar Singh two or three hundred rupees, or sometimes even five hundred; in the same manner as he received his salary from school. Sometimes he got even five or seven hundred rupees. And in future, the profit was certainly going to increase, not decrease.

HE did not get a wink of sleep that night. Much before dawn, he got up and went for a walk. At the break of dawn he came back and found Mittu Miyan still asleep. He woke him up and said in a low voice, "My son, don't wake up the boy..."

"Whom? Shama?"

"Yes, don't wake him up. Whenever he gets up, give him some tea and something to eat. Then bring him to the shop. I'm going there."

"Are you leaving now? Won't you have tea?"

"No, I'll have tea in the shop itself. Don't bother about me; look after Shama."

"All right *jee*. I'll look after him well."

EVERYONE in the house was still asleep, so Mittu entered the small room in front of the kitchen (which they called the store). When he realized that the store was almost dark, he switched on the light. In a corner, there were some old and torn newspapers and English magazines lying in a pile. A number of times Mittu had turned their pages, but except for the pictures, he could make no sense of what was in

them. On top of the pile he saw a magazine with the picture of a beautiful woman on the cover. She wore dark sunglasses and the wind seemed to play with her hair. A skimpy two-piece bikini covered her heavy breasts. Her white legs, arms and belly, and everything was exposed. And yet she was smiling. Mittu stared at the picture for some time and suddenly felt as if someone had caught him stealing something. He quickly came out of the room and checked. Shama and *ustad jee* were still asleep in the two rooms. He walked back to the room without making a noise. He picked up the magazine and began to turn its pages.

"Oye *amma!*" A sudden exclamation escaped his lips and then he shut his mouth tight and thought: had someone heard him?

He looked at the magazine again. What was that? In one of the pictures he saw a beautiful woman, a well-built man and an old man spread on the sand of a sea-shore or a river-bank. Like the woman on the cover, that woman too wore only a two or three inch wide bikini; and the men were probably completely naked. Or, perhaps they were wearing skin-coloured swimwear which was not visible to him. The three were lying close to one another with their legs spread wide apart. All of them wore black sunglasses. A little distance away from them, a few five or six-year old children played and ran about. They were completely naked. And yet they were laughing freely. After a few moments he could imagine the sound of their laughter and then Mittu shut his eyes and closed the magazine. He stood there for some time as if lost in thought and then went into the room of *ustad jee*. He tried to hear if there

was some sound in the room of the junior *ustad jee* sleeping in the other room. But it was still too early for him to get up. Walking softly like a cat he came to the bed of Shama, sat on it and shook his shoulder. Shama woke up with a start and looked around him with frightened eyes.

"Arre, it's me," Mittu whispered. Shama rubbed his eyes and squinted as if he could not see clearly.

"What's the matter?" Shama also whispered in return.

"Look at this...have you ever seen anything like this?" Mittu showed him those almost nude photographs in the magazine, and Shama sometimes looked at the pictures and then again at Mittu; but it appeared that he was still drowsy.

"Oye, you tail of a dog!" at that moment the roar of Mitthu *ustad* could be heard from the other room and tossing the magazine aside Mittu ran out of the room.

"Bringing tea, right away *jee*."

Mittu was so confused that he did not hear what else was said and going into the kitchen he began to light the stove.

Then yawning and stretching himself Mitthu *ustad* emerged from his room, half-closed the door and moving towards the kitchen shouted again, "Do you have brains or not? It's going to be seven and ..."

Then suddenly he turned towards the room of the big *ustad jee*, and there seeing Shama arranging his hair in a knot became furious.

"Who are you? Bastard, the riff-raff of the whole world seems to find a way here. Get lost or I'll break your legs, you bloody fool!"

And Shama ran barefoot from there as if a wild animal were chasing him to eat him up. When he had reached a good distance from the house, he looked back. He did not see anyone coming after him. While running his hair had become dishevelled once again, (he was happy that he had picked up his turban before he ran from there.) But he did not stop. Walking fast on the highway and occasionally looking back with frightened eyes, he went farther and farther away from that house where after many nights he had had a good sleep.

And there in the house, when Mittu took tea into *ustad jee's* room, he saw a woman lying in the bed. She was similar to the one whose picture he had just seen in the magazine. She too wore black sunglasses but he could not make out whether she was asleep or awake.

His hands began to tremble. With his head bent, he put the tea-tray on the small side-table and turned back with shaking legs when again he heard the growling voice of *ustad jee*, "Bring two more cups of tea, understood?"

"Jee."

And then he did not have the courage to look back.

Seven

IN the evening when Amar Singh returned home he was feeling sad. Mittu was already cooking in the kitchen. When Amar Singh went past the kitchen, Mittu asked,

“Big *ustad jee*, would you like to have some tea?”

Saying nothing; Amar Singh only gestured with his hand to say no. He looked at Mittu once and tried to smile, but that was not his usual smile.

Entering the room he took off his turban and put it on the small table and without taking off his shoes lay down on the bed. He eyes fell on the torn slippers of Shama and he suddenly felt disconcerted. He got up and placed the slippers under the cot on which Shama had slept the previous night. Then he moved towards his bed and felt as if his whole body was drenched in sweat. He turned the ceiling fan at full speed and again lay down on the bed.

At that instant he felt darkness thickening all round him. He ran his eyes on the walls and the roof, and thought

that it wasn't as dark as it appeared to him. But he got up and switched on both the lights. Exhausted, when he lay down on the bed again, he felt the bright light of the bulbs piercing his eyes like thorns. When he closed his eyes the piercing sensation in the eyes seemed to increase. He got up and began to put on his shoes.

"*Ustad jee*, if you are going out somewhere, shall I make some tea for you?" standing near the door Mittu asked with some hesitation.

"Haven't I told you already; I don't want anything?"

When he answered in a somewhat gruff voice, Mittu was scared. *Ustad jee* never said anything without a smile. What had happened to him that day? Thinking this Mittu returned to the kitchen.

After some time Amar Singh walked out of the house barefoot. First he paused in the veranda for some time and peered into the darkness all around him; and then, holding his hands behind him and his head bent, he began to walk on the footpath going north. After three or four hundred meters the footpath joined a wide road. Absent-mindedly, he continued walking on the road. Noticing the shadows cast by some old trees around him; he stopped suddenly as if he had seen a snake.

He looked back and saw a four or five storey building lighted brightly as if the whole building were made of electric lights. When he examined it closely, he noticed a two-yard-wide black strip of darkness on the second storey down from the top. There was no light there...He continued to stare at that flat for a long time and it began to look like the head of Brahmananda, the actor who played

the role of Ravan's sister Shurpanakha in the Ramlila.

"The dark patch is like the nose cut off from Shurpanakha's face!," he murmured and then turning his eyes away from that lighted building and holding his hands behind him as before, he continued to walk on the road.

But he could not go very far. He turned back. (On his way back he did not have the courage to look at the lighted building; he seemed to be frightened of something.) When he reached the footpath which led to his house, he stopped and looked up at the sky and saw countless stars twinkling there, but their light did not prick his eyes like those of the building he had seen a few moments before. The sky, the stars and the small hills on the far horizon—everything looked blurred as if they had recently emerged from a dust storm. He did not stop. As he moved towards the house, the darkness increased. In the house also there was very little light, as if only an earthen lamp was burning in it.

"Arre Mittu, why haven't you switched on the lights?," entering the house he demanded in an angry voice.

"When you left, *jee*, you had switched on all the lights, so I switched them off. Our electricity bill has increased lately."

"Oh, so you too have started thinking about saving money?"

Not saying anything and feeling slightly scared, Mittu came out of the kitchen and going into Amar Singh's room switched on both the lights and the fan.

"*Ustad jee*, shall I bring dinner?"

"I am not feeling hungry at the moment."

"Then should I wait for some time, *jee*?"

"Now shut up. I'll tell you when I am hungry."

As before, he lay down on the bed feeling tired. He looked at the roof and saw a spider-web. He looked searchingly but he could not see the spider. That was strange: it was a web made by a spider; and if a fly was caught in it, the poor thing would not be able to live or die. How does it feel to...? That would really be unbearable.

Thinking that, he felt that he was sweating again. He said loudly, "O brother Mittu, get me a glass of water."

"Coming right away, *ustad jee*."

When Mittu brought the water, Amar Singh sat up and drank the whole glass in one go.

"All right son, switch off the lights, and after having your dinner, go to bed."

"Big *ustad jee*, how can I go to bed now? You haven't eaten, nor has the junior *ustad jee* returned."

"Has Mitthu not come back yet?"

"It is not even nine, and he never comes before ten or eleven."

"You are right," he said, trying to smile. "All right, I'll not have my dinner today. You may go to bed now."

Mittu smiled, switched off both the lights and closed the door behind him, though Amar Singh had not asked him to do it. Then he left. (He often closed the connecting door as Amar Singh did not want to talk to Mitthu when he was drunk and shouted at Mittu. Mitthu also knew this.) Sleep did not come and so tossing on the bed he began to think about Mitthu. The first question that rose

in his mind was: Do only such people succeed in this world?

...When Mitthu was in school, his mother often came to grandfather for medicines. Sometimes she wept and told him about her woes. But grandfather only said, "All this is *karma*, everyone has to face it. You will have to bear what is in your destiny."

Mitthu's mother was very disappointed with that drifter son of hers. Then after passing class ten, he disappeared for two or three years. By then Amar Singh had been appointed a teacher in a school. After grandfather's death, when Mitthu's mother came to Amar Singh to tell him about her problems he did not know how to console her. As grandfather had done earlier, he too consoled her by talking about her *karma*.

Then one day after having wandered from place to place, Mitthu suddenly came back and renting a shop, began to paint signs. It took him only a few months to become a well-known sign-painter in the town. Amar Singh had always been interested in painting. The two of them were successful in their business, though Mitthu's mother, a widow, and also the people of the locality, never really thought well of him. (As a matter of fact, even his friends were unhappy with him because of some of his unsavory habits.) But many years had passed since then, and Mitthu never gave Amar Singh a reason to complain. If someone made a comment, "Well, master, how can you and that scoundrel be friends?" Amar Singh only laughed. If he still insisted on an answer he merely said, "Brother, you must have heard the saying: the black-gram *dal* may

be a delicacy for one person, while it can be indigestible for the other!"

But no one except Amar Singh knew that although Mitthu was not trusted by other people, he had never cheated him. It was he who had asked Amar Singh to go on a long leave from his school and come to the city. If Mitthu had not done that, Amar Singh would have spent his entire life in that small place, which was not larger than a goat's hoof... Although Amar Singh had never really approved of Mitthu's bad habits, he had never criticized him either.

His mind full of such thoughts of Mitthu, Amar Singh turned his face towards the wall, and closing his eyes tried to sleep. But sleep eluded him. Then other thoughts began to cross his mind. Thinking of Soni and home he suddenly felt nostalgic. At that moment he wanted to go to Soni immediately, but then he thought: if he left, who would look after the shop? And would he be able to complete the job that had to be done by the previous evening? Mitthu was looking after the work related to the market and was extremely busy. So it was not possible for him to work in the shop. That is why Amar Singh had to do, or get done, everything in the shop.

Lost in such thoughts he did not know at what time he went to sleep and when he woke up. It was probably past midnight. There was silence everywhere except for the low sound of Mittu's snoring coming from the small room near the kitchen. He did not notice when Mittu went to bed, nor knew whether Mitthu had returned, or whether he was spending the night in someone else's house.

Amar Singh got up, turned on the light and saw that it was some minutes past two. Switching off the light, he tried to sleep again, but found it difficult to do so. For a long time, he tossed and turned in bed; and finally, putting on his turban and shoes he quietly came out of the house. Then with slow steps he began to walk towards the shop.

And now he was only thinking about the work that had to be completed before the evening.

Eight

WHEN Maakhi returned after buying the daily vegetables, he said to Soni, "Aunty, in the market I met Preetu. He said that he is coming to dinner today."

"Will he come?" Soni replied, "Hasn't he said the same thing earlier too? Has he ever come? I don't know what battle he is fighting that he has no time to visit us."

"No, no, aunty. He will definitely come today."

"How do you know?"

"He himself said it."

Soni began to laugh. She thought: Maakhi was still a child; how could he understand these things?

When evening came, Soni cooked the dinner, and quite absent-mindedly, she cooked roasted and mashed eggplants and salted rice with peas. When the cooking was over, she asked Maakhi to go out into the street and see if Preetu was coming. Immediately he ran out; and then Soni began to wonder why she had sent him. After some time, Maakhi

returned, but Preetu was not with him. Everyone in the house was hungry, but Soni did not announce the dinner...She knew from experience how difficult such waiting could be; but it was perhaps the first time that she was actually waiting for Preetu. She did not even know why she was doing it.

Late in the evening Preetu came and that surprised her even more. She asked him, "Which fields were you watering that you are so late?"

"No, *jee*. I wasn't doing anything particular..."

Preetu did not know what to say to her. When she noticed his hesitation, shyness and the blush on his face, she wanted to laugh but could not. She asked Maakhi to bring the plates, bowls, *dal*, rice, vegetables, bread, and everything else from the kitchen into the room that used to be Amar Singh's studio once. Everyone including the children had a good meal and they talked for a long time. It was Soni who mostly did the talking; Preetu would occasionally put in a word or two.

"All right, stay here for the night today, Preetu!"

"*Jee*...? I mean I've to go home; mother will be waiting."

"Why? Does she need you for grinding the corn?"

Hearing that Maakhi laughed heartily; but Preetu did not join in the laughter. He stood there, silent and lost. He did not have the courage to say no again.

"I am going to get your bed arranged in the same room where you had your dinner. There you can sleep undisturbed. No one will wake you up. Is that all right?," she said.

Preetu did not say anything. When Soni looked at

Preetu carefully in the light of the bulb burning in the courtyard, she was surprised to see that in such a short time, Preetu had grown into a young man. The blackish down on his cheek made his fair face look even more beautiful. He had grown taller and had put on some weight too. Even in his kurta- pyajama and plain turban he was looking handsome.

"Maakhi, bring the bedding from the store and put it on the divan; Preetu will sleep here," Soni said in a commanding voice and Preetu could not refuse. Rising, he himself walked towards the store saying, "I'll bring the bedding, jee."

Soni smiled. Suddenly it occurred to her that Preetu had been coming to their house for many years, but he had never addressed her in a manner that would describe a relationship. He never called her sister-in-law or aunty or sister. He only used 'jee' or *Bibi jee* when addressing her. Soni too never called him 'brother' or 'nephew' as she did Maakhi. Whether it was automatic, or whether there was something undefined in their relationship—how could anyone know that?

After some time, Soni gave her daughters their glass of milk and sent them to bed. By then Maakhi and Preetu had also gone to bed in their rooms. Preetu switched off the light of his room but the light in the courtyard streamed into it. Before she went to bed, Soni went near the door of Preetu's room and stood there watching him. She did not know why she did it. And then a thought struck her and she asked him in the same manner as she often asked Amar Singh, "Preetu, don't you need water to drink in the night?"

“Jee?...jee, I don’t need anything.”

With a start Preetu sat up in his bed. His hair was dishevelled. Turning his face away from her he tied his hair into a knot. Soni only smiled and closing the door behind her said, “If you feel thirsty, there is drinking water in the kitchen. Don’t just lie here feeling thirsty.”

Preetu did not know what to say. Soni switched off the light of the courtyard and going into her room lay down with her two daughters. The room was dark except for the dim light coming from one green bulb. When even that soft light began to hurt her eyes, she rose and switched it off. Feeling vaguely uneasy, but making an effort to forget everything, she tried to sleep, but sleep was far from her eyes.

Then she noticed: the light coming in from the windows opening into the courtyard began to increase slowly. Once or twice she got up to find out where the light was coming from but she could not be sure. She remained awake for a long time, constantly changing her position in bed. Her eyes were still wide open. When she found it impossible to remain in bed, she got up and came out into the courtyard.

She was amazed to see the eastern sky. It was a full-moon night. In the moonlight the courtyard seemed to bloom like a flower-garden. For a while she exulted in the beauty of the moonlight and then began to feel restless when her eyes fell on the closed door of Preetu’s room. Quite unconsciously and very slowly, her feet began to move towards the room. As she came close to the door she felt as if her whole body were burning. (Once or twice, she

also felt light headed). Once she felt so giddy that she had to lean against the wall.

...And when she came very close to the door, she found that her feet were unsteady once again. For a few moments she was unable to lift her hand. But when she did and her fingers touched the door, she felt as if a scorpion had stung her. She was too weak to push the door open, that door which she herself had closed before going to bed. For some time she stood there undecided, and then felt a tremor go through her legs. The hand that had touched the door too seemed to have become lifeless; she could not raise it again to touch the door. Step by step, she began to move backwards and found that she was too weak to walk. The wall of her room was not very far from her. Steadying herself against the wall and taking two or three big strides, she reached her room, but with great difficulty. Exhausted, she sank into her bed. She could no longer check her tears and they trickled freely down her cheeks. Then she began to sob, and soon, she was weeping uncontrollably.

"Oh, what had happened to me?," she asked herself when the sobs stopped; but no answer came. (However the thought did come to her that knowingly she had asked the two boys to sleep in two separate rooms. Then, had there been a wicked desire in her heart from the very beginning...?)

For a long time she lay on the bed with her face down but tears continued to spill from her eyes.

Nine

ONE day followed another, but Amar Singh did not come home, nor was there a letter from him. The day would somehow pass, but no matter what she did, the night would stand still; weighing her down. For the first time in her life she had known nights that did not seem to end. Every limb in her body would ache as she turned and tossed in bed. Her eyes hurt constantly. In the morning when she did the household chores, she would not be able to hold a pot, or a dress, or even a light spoon; it would soon slip from her hands and fall.

As it had happened on many other nights, that night too she could not sleep. The *tik-tik* sound of the wall-clock seemed to strike her like a hammer beating inside her head. When the clock chimed one, two, three, eleven times, she shut her ears with her hands. Then she thought of the clock chiming once again after half an hour, and then, twelve times after another half hour, and she felt scared.

She felt like dashing the clock to the ground and breaking it into pieces. But she could not do even that. When she stopped thinking about the clock, she seemed to settle down a bit. Lying on the bed, she looked out of the window opening in the courtyard. There was nothing but darkness there. After that, she did not hear even the sound of the clock. Her head seemed to turn into stone.

She could not say how late in the night it was when she heard someone knocking at the entrance door. She sat up and heard the same sound again. Getting up, she came out of the room. The sound of knocking came again and she ran to the door. She opened the door before the fourth knock. At first she thought that it was really he: the same medium height, the same neatly wrapped turban, and the same smiling, fair and round face.

After coming in when he tried to close the door, his hand touched Soni's holding the latch. She shook with fear. The hand was cold like ice. Before she could bolt the door properly, Soni fainted. Gurkeert supported her in his arms. He picked her up like a child and took her to the room where Preetu had slept the previous night. After gently placing her on the divan, he began to massage her soles and palms. After some time she regained consciousness.

"How do you feel now, Soni?," bringing his face close to hers, he asked in a whisper.

"What?"

"How are you now?"

But she could not say anything. Gurkeert first stroked her forehead, and then began to run his hand gently over

her cheeks, chin and lips; and Soni felt calmed; as if she was sinking into sleep. His fingers were very soft. When she felt them touching her breasts, automatically her arms stretched above her head and her body seemed to merge into another soft body...the soft body seemed to be fixed like the moon in the sky...and she felt as if she had spread her wings like a bird and ...exactly like a bird...was floating over the clouds...!

After some time Soni felt that she had tumbled down from the sky into a deep abyss, or into the nether world. She felt her limbs were scattered all about her. But perhaps her lips were still part of her; locked over which were two other soft lips. How strange was the experience of that touch that she felt a divine thrill even in the limbs scattered around her...!

And at that moment she sat up with a start. When Gurkeert suddenly saw Soni's face in the partly-dark room, he felt frightened and began to get up from the divan. Soni pushed him hard and he fell on the ground. When he got up and tried to embrace Soni, she rolled over to the other side of the divan. Carefully, he turned her on her back. And then he felt that her hands and feet had again become cold. He was suddenly filled with fear, and trembling in panic, he rushed towards the door and opening it softly came out into the street. Then, closing the door behind him and looking in all directions like a thief, he walked with quick steps to run away from that house. But he did not know that by the time he had reached the door, Soni had got up, and staring wildly all around her, tried to walk to her bedroom. Then suddenly she had a blackout and

fell so heavily on the divan that her head banged against the wall and began to bleed.

She did not know when in the morning she regained consciousness, and it was then only that she noticed that one corner of the sheet on the divan was covered with her blood. She did not know how all that had happened. It seemed to be a nightmare. She picked up the bed-sheet and threw it into the bathroom. Only when her head began to hurt badly, she knew how deep the wound in the back of her head was.

Ten

IT had been a long time since he wrote to Soni. He had been putting it off every day and now two weeks had gone by and still he had not written to her simply because he could not find the time. Now there was more work than before. For some days even Mitthu had not come to the shop; he was very busy in his work 'outside'. That was the reason why Amar Singh had to assume full responsibility of the shop. From morning till late in the evening, he was busy in work, or in supervising the boys in the shop. So where was the time?

That day, feeling slightly more tired than usual, Amar Singh sat in a chair and watched people moving on the road. It was his usual pastime when he felt tired. (The boys in the shop had gone home.) First, he saw those dark, curly-haired Africans, whom the local people called 'habshis'. Then two or three tall foreigners passed by. A young man went past riding a scooter with a girl sitting on the pillion

and overtook those dark and fair people as if he were mocking at them. (Amar Singh thought that probably he did that only to tell to them how proud he was of being 'independent'. A smile appeared on his face). But when he saw their clothes, hairstyle and behaviour, he felt that he was in some foreign country and not in India.

Then it also occurred to him that in his land too the world was changing fast. In the beginning when he began to work in the shop, that area was very sparsely populated. But in such a short time, he did not know from where so many houses and shops and roads and electric poles appeared. When he saw those educated people and the milky-white lights which began to shine the moment evening fell, he felt greatly relaxed. (He had seldom felt so relaxed earlier). He had been working incessantly for ten or twelve hours and did not have the energy even to think.

When he wanted to spend some more time there, he got up and going to the nearby tea-shop asked the shopkeeper to send him a cup of tea. Retuning from there, he again lowered himself into the chair. By the time the tea came and he had finished drinking it, it was so late that shopkeepers near him began to pull down their shutters. One by one, as the shops became dark, Amar Singh felt that he was the only person left there. (More than he had ever done in the past, these days he had begun to hate loneliness, and that continuous feeling of desolation.) There was still some tea left in the cup when suddenly a sense of boredom overpowered him. He placed the glass with some tea in it on the paint-smeared stool kept on his right.

"So master, are you still here?," he heard someone saying and to his surprise found that it was Mitthu. He had switched off the motorcycle some distance away from the shop and had cruised so silently that Amar Singh did not know when he reached the shop.

"Come, my prince, come!", Amar Singh replied with a smile.

As Mitthu moved towards the stool on the right to sit on it, Amar Singh removed the glass of tea and said, "Will you have tea, my lord?"

"Now come on, what third-class things do you mention!", knitting his brows Mitthu said, "Is tea a thing worth drinking? In this pleasant weather you should talk of whiskey or rum, which are the only things worth drinking."

Amar Singh watched him closely—Mitthu wore a new shirt made of some silk-like material and blue trousers. It was a half-sleeved shirt, displaying his muscular arms, making him look like a sportsman. His face too was glowing, and his moustache and hair were styled in the new fashion. (Earlier he had a sword-shaped moustache, but now it looked bigger and flatter.)

"You're looking quite dashing today!," stroking his lightly-clipped moustache with the back of his left hand, Amar Singh said. Suddenly a thought came to Mitthu and he burst into laughter.

"Yes, yes, you are quite right, master. I am coming from a big house where I had vodka. You know vodka is famous all over the world. It is a Russian drink. Here you don't get it easily. And the kick it gives...just don't

ask me about it, my friend!"

Then something occurred to him that made him laugh again, and he said, "Master! If they only saw this, they will find it very funny. Those people like such things."

"What things?"

"Like your habit of absent-mindedly stroking both sides of your moustache with your hand, as a result of which the moustache on the left gets pulled in the opposite direction while the other on the right side remains where it was. And also your habit of pulling up your slipping trousers with your left hand again and again, and the way you wink at anyone without waiting to find out whether it is a boy or a girl. And when you are painting, you have a habit of folding your tongue backwards and sticking it out of your mouth as if it were a piece of chicken liver caught in the beak of a crow ..."

"That's enough, don't go on with this. Have you also learnt some good things from your *ustad*, or has he only taught you to be naughty?"

Amar Singh guffawed, but Mitthu was serious. He said in a low voice, "Big *ustad jee*, if I had not learnt something good from my *ustad*, would I have been here where I am today?"

Amar Singh accepted that explanation, but the words 'those people' still troubled him like a thorn in his heart.

"Who are 'those people', man?," Amar Singh asked with a smile.

"They are the people of that country where we are going—I mean, the red-faced, brown-eyed and light-haired whites, in other words, the Englishmen, the

inhabitants of the country called England.”

“How do Englishmen come into this picture?”

“They came into the picture two hundred years ago. After plundering and crushing us they left, but still the blokes do not leave us alone. They say they cannot do without us. They tell us, come and dance with our women. They love Indian men, especially the Punjabis.”

Amar Singh could not understand what he was talking about. When Mitthu saw him staring at him in confusion, he knew that Amar Singh had not got his meaning.

“See, it’s really like this, master! Very soon the great Mitthu Singh Lakhanpal is going to the country of Englishmen, which is England. After he arrives in that country he will make arrangements for you, that is, our *ustad*, to come there. The two of us will set up a large studio in that place, and then we will also plunder them, the way those monkey-faced blokes looted us. Now does that make sense to you?”

It did not make sense to Amar Singh. He did not know whether those meaningless words were just a joke; or whether he was telling the truth. Before that day, Mitthu had never spoken of leaving that profitable shop and moving to some other place, then how did that idea suddenly come to him?

“Master, you appear to be lost in the dark. You know that your young brother, who is also your student, does not fly on imaginary wings; he is a practical man, you know!”

Taking a small booklet from the back pocket of his trousers, Mitthu offered it to him. On its blue cover he could see the emblem of three lions printed in golden colour.

Opening it gingerly, he saw on its first page Mitthu's photograph, his name, his father's name, his complete home address along with some other details. He read all that slowly and then sometimes looking at Mitthu, and sometimes at the booklet, he felt a little uneasy. But Mitthu only smiled when he saw his confusion.

"Why, do you still don't believe me?," smilingly Mitthu asked.

"How did you do all this, and when did you plan it all? You never told me anything about it. I am quite surprised."

"What is there to be surprised about? You know well that this student of yours never looks back. So what's surprising about what I have done?"

Amar Singh did not know what to say to that. He remained silent for some time and then told him what was troubling him, "But, friend, how will we manage this big business here?"

Mitthu laughed loudly when he heard his *ustad* saying that.

"Wah, *ustad*! You have learnt so much from grandfather and have also read the Gurbani, and yet you do not know this simple truth that man will leave this world empty handed, the way he has come into it!"

"Don't give me your preaching; come to the point."

"I haven't said anything that is wrong, *ustad*. Before I leave this country, I will get your passport made. I'll not take a single paisa from the shop's income; it will all be yours. When I reach there, the first thing I'll do is to establish myself and earn thousands of pounds. When I have made proper arrangements, as I did before you came

here, I will telephone you. If you have a desire to fly high with me, the only thing you need to do is to book an eight-hour flight to England and come to me. But if you want to stay here and remain hanging like a bat in this place, it will be your decision. I am not going to carry you to that country in my lap. You are a great painter and certainly you are not a small child. Am I right or not?"

Rising abruptly and holding his hand Mitthu said, "Let's go home; you must be very tired."

And the fact was that still Amar Singh did not really get his meaning. At that moment he felt like that young boy who followed Baba Milkha from street to street carrying a sack on his back and calling out to his customers, the boy who did not know anything about 'this world'.

When they were leaving the shop, Mitthu's foot accidentally hit the tea-glass. It broke and the left-over tea spilt on the paint-spattered floor. Amar Singh thought: was that a good omen or bad? But he could not decide even that.

Eleven

IT took only one week for Mitthu to make all arrangements necessary for his departure. He went to Delhi, booked the air-ticket to England, and arranged everything else. He was to leave the next day, and it was his last night there.

When he returned home quite late in the night, he was extremely tired. Mittu and Amar Singh were still awake waiting for him. As he entered Amar Singh's room, he said with a smile, "So Master, take my final *salaam*. Who knows when we shall meet again? Didn't Waras Shah say, *Bhalaan moye te bichhre kaun mele, kaun gayan noon mor liyanwada ee?*"*

When Mitthu was taking off his shoes, Amar Singh looked at him with some surprise. Reclining on his bed Mitthu began to speak as if he could anticipate the questions that rose in Amar Singh's mind.

* After all, who can bring back those who have gone away?

"See, *ustad jee*, on my way to Delhi, I also visited my mother. I told her everything about my going and gave her some money too. As it usually happens, she began to weep. I consoled her as I think that is what I should have done...She was worried about my marriage, I handled that problem also. I told her: mother, I'll find a girl there and marry her. Then both of us will earn. Every six months, or at least, once every year, we'll come to see you. If you want to live with us, we'll take you there. And I promise to look after my brothers and sisters, so don't worry."

Pausing for a moment he continued, "And now there is one more thing. I have filled in your application form and have signed it wherever I was required to and have given it to the passport officer. I don't know whether you remember it, but I also deposited the fee then. In two weeks time, you can collect the passport from the office. Well, even that you need not do; you can come to London with the help of a letter from me. You can stay there for six months without any problem. After that, do whatever you think is right. If you have a problem, there is a clerk named Meghraj Singla in the British High Commission. He is a close friend of mine. Go to him. He will explain everything to you and will take care of all your problems. Now, is there anything else you want to know?"

Amar Singh remained silent. He only thought that the man lying on his bed was not that friend of his whom he had known once, but was some magician who could bring a genie out of a brass lamp by simply rubbing it; and that genie could do everything—even those things that had appeared impossible to Amar Singh till that day.

AFTER seeing Mitthu off, when he returned home he was feeling strangely alone in that large city. He was like a child lost in a forest. All around him there was darkness. For a full week, he could do no work. When sorrow became too overpowering, he would console himself with these lines that grandfather had taught him:

Davagni bahut trin jaare.

*Koi hariya boot rahiyo ree!**

Again and again he thought—is this the lot of man? Grandfather always said that the Gurbani puts this question before everyone. “O man,” asks the Satguru, “Tell me, when this world burns in its own fire, is there a green plant safe from this fire of *maya*? And if even a plant is not safe here, do you think you can escape it?”

Whatever grandfather said was completely true, but he could never understand his words fully. What he remembered now—what actually had stayed in his mind—was what Baba Milkha had taught him. Following Baba Milkha’s teaching he had been successful in his life. Now, Mitthu was going to establish his business in the land of those who had ruled over this country for two hundred years.

IN a few days he was back to his earlier routine. Working without Mitthu did not make him sad now. He also thought that the money that went into Mitthu’s pocket would come

* The forest fire has burnt all the greenery,
Now only a few green plants are left here.

to him now, which was roughly half of the total income from the shop.

Only three or four weeks had passed when Mitthu's letter came. He read it carefully.

Respected Ustad jee,

As I reached here, I got in touch with my fellow-Punjabis and, with their help, was able to get a job in a factory. I return home after putting in eight hours of work. My house has two rooms, one of which I have converted into my studio. These days I am painting only the portraits of the elderly among the Punjabis, Gujaratis and also of some other Indians. The income is good. I plan to open a shop of my own but, at the moment, there are some problems. With your blessings, I hope everything will turn out well. There is nothing to worry.

Everything else is all right, but I have not forgotten my promise that I have to bring you here. I don't care how I do it, you will certainly come. That is the promise I have made to myself.

All else is well. I pray to God for your well-being. Do remember me to the boys.

*Very respectfully yours,
Mitthu Singh Lakhanpal*

Amar Singh read the letter a number of times and thought that one day he too would fly to where Mitthu was, and prove Baba Milkha's prediction right.

ONE day Sultan Akbar came into the shop and stood defiantly before Amar Singh. It looked as if he had come prepared to quarrel with him.

“*Ustad jee*, please clear my dues and let me go.”

When he was speaking, the pock-marks on his face stood out. When he saw him standing there like that with his neck held stiff, Amar Singh laughed and said, “Have you come here to take your dues, or to beat me up?”

Sultan Akbar gave no answer. He continued to stare at him in anger.

“What’s the matter after all? Are you bored with the work, or is there something else?”

“There is nothing else, *jee*. You just clear my dues...”

“If there is nothing else, why are you behaving so arrogantly? You’re acting as if it is not only you but also your grandfather and great-grandfather to whom I owe money, and you have come here to collect their dues too.”

“Think what you will but I am not going to work with you anymore.”

“Arre brother, who is asking you to work here? But first tell me, how did you think of leaving this place?”

“I did not think of anything, but now I cannot work with you.”

“Is the work too heavy? Or, is there something else that is troubling you? Let me know at least this much, my son.”

“What can I tell you? In the beginning you paid me one hundred and fifty rupees a month. Since the junior *ustad* left, you have started paying me one hundred and twenty-five rupees. And instead of eight hours, you ask

me to work for ten or eleven hours. And sir, this is known as cheating. Every employer lives on the labour of the worker, and exploits him. We will not allow it. We must get what is due to us; I have nothing more to say.”

When he spoke in that swaggering manner, he looked like a labour leader to Amar Singh. He thought that fledgling of a boy was insulting a gentleman like him. How could he tolerate that? He also became angry.

“Now shut up. Go and show your leadership to someone else. You just tell me how much money I owe you. Take your money and get lost. You do not have to shout at me, is that clear?”

“You have to pay me one hundred and fifty rupees for one month; and also my wages for fifteen days more.” Sultan still sounded angry.

“All right, you will get that; now tell me, will you work today or not?”

“Today? I do not want to stay even a minute longer in this place.”

Sultan immediately turned back and left as if he had never worked there. Amar Singh continued to watch him till he could see him. He began to think: how many different kinds of people are there in this world! This sixteen or seventeen year old lad— on one hand he is such a good painter that he does his work not only with great speed but also with remarkable neatness and expertise; he never allows the colours to vary even by a shade; he mixes colours so well that even Amar Singh was surprised by his skill, and on the other, he speaks with such arrogance, bosses over other boys in the shop, and stops working whenever

he feels like. He also keeps a detailed account of what is due to him. Amar Singh could not tolerate that. He wanted the boys to respect him, to regard him as they do their father or brother. He could not accept the fact that the teacher and students who worked in the same place were not on good terms with one another.

There was one more thing about Sultan that he did not like. He was using the word 'exploitation' repeatedly as if Amar Singh was some blood-thirsty beast tearing the flesh from his body and devouring it. Because of these reasons Sultan appeared—as grandfather would have put it—to be like that vegetable called bitter-gourd, which was bitter in taste, but good for health.

"Good going boys, complete the work," in an affectionate voice Amar Singh said to the three boys, who while working, were watching Sultan in a manner that suggested that they too approved of his anger and arrogance.

He sat down again on the chair and began to watch the boys working there. After some time he had a feeling that they all looked alike. They had the same haircut. The stickiness of the sweat on their necks had made their shirt collars dirty in the same manner. While working, their hands were moving in the same manner and their bent backs also looked identical. He was surprised that for the first time that day, when seen from behind, all of them looked alike. He could not understand why it was so.

He looked at the watch and noticed that it was already ten. He got up, went into the store at the back of the shop and opened the big cupboard. He took out a cheque book

and put it in the back pocket of his trousers. He shut the locker and the cupboard and put the keys in the front-pocket of his trousers.

“Listen boys, I am going out for some work and will return in half hour or so; if someone comes looking for me, tell him that *ustad jee* will return by eleven o’clock. Is that clear?”

“All right, *jee*,” turning to him Mittu said. Amar Singh could not even recognize his voice. (His completely different, sweet and musical voice also sounded arrogant like Sultan Akbar’s.)

When he came out of the shop, he first thought of taking the scooter; but then decided to walk. (He had been used to walking from the days when he followed Baba Milkha from street to street.) In fifteen or twenty minutes when he reached the bank, he saw that there was a long queue in front of the cabin of the clerk giving tokens. He thought that instead of standing in the queue it would be better to sit down on the bench kept in the veranda and relax for some time

He lowered himself on the bench and began to watch the people who had come to withdraw money. He saw a fat man standing at the head of the queue and thought that he looked like an African. What was a foreigner doing there? he asked himself and turned his glance to the open ground near the bank. Slightly away from the road three or four shoe-shine boys sat on the ground. He also saw some middle aged women wearing saris and carrying small purses walking towards the big market on the right. As the shoe-shine boys saw the women, they began to shout ‘*boot*

polish!' and struck with long brushes in their hands the wooden stand on which people kept their shoes to be polished. As they watched the women they also laughed and talked animatedly among themselves, but what they were saying to one another could not be heard from that distance. He was somewhat surprised to think that those boys were so carefree, as if they had no worries at all. (Perhaps it was their time to feel carefree; as he himself had felt when he roamed the streets after Baba.)

Feeling slightly bored with the scene, he looked again at the long queue, and found that the fat man was not there. He wondered where he had vanished so fast. He was occupied with such thoughts when he saw a dark man carrying a black leather bag. The man came and sat down on the same bench where Amar Singh sat. Presently, he pulled open the zipper of the bag, took out bundles of hundred-rupee notes and placed them on the bench. Amar Singh counted: there were nine such bundles, that is, ninety thousand rupees. He was still staring at the money when the fat man pulled the zipper again and closed the bag. When he got up to leave, his trousers began to slip. Holding the bag under his arm he pulled up his belt and went out of the veranda. The very next moment he had disappeared. Amar Singh felt as if he could not breathe. For the first time in his life he had seen someone carrying so much money and that too so casually...And what a man! Suddenly he said:

*Munh na mattha jiven jinn paharon lattha!**

* He looks ugly like a ghost
That has descended from the mountains.

Coming out of his reverie, he began to observe the people in the queue again. It was as long as before; probably some more people had joined it. Taking out his cheque-book he began to write a cheque and felt that his hand was trembling. Some people in the queue were looking at him. Turning his back to them he wrote with a trembling hand 'two hundred only' and again looked at the queue. No one was watching him now. After signing the cheque when he detached it from the cheque-book he thought: how much money would be left in his account? It would perhaps be around twenty thousand rupees. He felt a little relieved at the thought and decided to check the balance in his passbook before he left the bank.

Holding the cheque in his hand he stood in the queue and when after half an hour or so, he came out of the bank with the cash, he was walking with downcast eyes, as if in shame. People came and went in that place carrying thousands of rupees and he had walked to such a long distance only to withdraw two hundred rupees.

He felt very sad. (At those times he would only remember grandfather). He was surprised to see that fat black man was walking in front of him, but when he looked carefully he realized that it was someone else, though the face resembled the fat man's. Then he thought of the story about a preacher that grandfather often told him.

...The preacher was very fat. When he laughed his entire paunch shook. He told a story, no, not a story but something that happened to him. Once he visited someone's house. A servant offered him water in a tiny tumbler. Tilting his head to one side the preacher said to

him, "Pour it down." But when even after being told "Pour it down" three times, the servant could not follow him, the preacher, whose name was Nigahi Bhakta said to him, "Arre brother, this much water can only be poured into the ear. One needs a whole jug of water to drink, that is why I am asking you to pour this water into my ear, but you are too stupid to understand me."

Amar Singh continued to walk and suddenly began to laugh. He raised his eyes from the ground and saw that people around him were walking so fast that they seemed to be running. He could not say where they were going, but no one looked at him. He lowered his eyes again and walked on, and then he remembered another story about Nigahi Bhakta which his grandfather had told him.

Every time he went to the bank, the story would occur to him. Once a trader went mad and went on repeating only one sentence, '*Dhovtan gayee re, Dhovtan gayee re.* (It disappeared when I was washing it. It disappeared when I was washing it.) His family took him to several doctors but no one could diagnose his illness. Then one day a preacher like Bhakta Nigahi came there and asked them, "Where was he on the day when he spoke this sentence for the first time?" The mad man's family said, "As he did every day, he went to the river to bathe, and from there he returned repeating this sentence." The preacher asked, "Was there anyone else with him that day?" The family said, "A man had seen him bathing from a distance." The preacher called the man and asked him, "Brother, where and in what condition did you see him?" That man replied, "When after bathing he was coming out of the river he suddenly bent

low and remained in that position for a long time. Then he lifted something heavy and I thought that it was a brass pot that he had lifted out of the water and was washing it. Suddenly he began to rush this way and that, as if searching for something under water he ran into the deep parts of the river and also into the shallow parts. And finally, when he came out of the river, he was saying, "*Dhovtan gayee re, Dhovtan gayee re.*"

The preacher called all the other traders in that place and said to them, "Brothers, it concerns you all; so listen carefully. This brother of yours found a brass pot on the river bed. His foot struck it and he took it out of the water. Naturally, he wanted to clean the mud around it and discovered that it was full of gold coins. But when he was cleaning the pot, ripples rose in water, and the pot fell from his hands. He searched for it but could not find it; it was God playing a trick with him. That pot came into his hands for some time and then it was lost; this is the cause of his madness."

Then Bhakta Nigahi continued, "Look, O you mad men, that pot full of gold coins was neither earned by that trader, nor had he inherited it from his forefathers. But just once, because of someone's trick—not really someone's, but of God's himself—the pot came into his hands, and then it was lost. In that pot there was not a copper belonging to that trader.... O fools, just think, if the mere touch of wealth for a few moments can make this man mad, for how many lives will the wealth in your safes keep you insane?"

Then Nigahi Bhakta laughed, and his belly began to

shake. People too laughed, but then he suddenly became serious and said, "Fools, don't laugh. *Maya* is a serpent; whoever is bitten by it would not escape the cycle of eighty four *lakh* births and deaths of various kinds. Do you follow me, but how can you understand?"

A man got up and said, "So Bhakta *jee*, do you mean to say that we should give you the wealth kept in our safes?" Nigahi was silent for some time and then said, "Yes, give it to me, but I will not keep it; I will offer all that *maya* to God."

Another man said, "Bhakta *jee*, where does this God live?" Bhakta *jee* replied, "He certainly doesn't live in your belly. If He lives anywhere, He will be found in a poor man's hut. He will never visit your house, if at all He goes anywhere. He will visit some *Vidur's* house. He will leave your rich food and partake of the poor man's meager meal." The man said, "So you will give our wealth to those who live in huts?" Bhakta *jee* said, "Arre dimwit, you have shown me neither your safe nor your wealth in it but have eaten up half of my head. If you show it to me, or give it to me, I will take it and then will give it to some poor man, but if you do that, the other half of my head too will disappear because of you. Keep that serpent yourself." And joining both his palms and touching his forehead with them in a gesture of greeting, Bhakta *jee* completed his sermon and went away laughing....

Suddenly Amar Singh looked up and found Mittu standing in front of him. He laughed and patting fondly on his shoulder said, "You do not go mad, my son!"

And when he began to laugh loudly, Mittu and the other two boys were confused and thought: What has happened to the big *ustad jee* today; we never saw him laughing so much, though he smiles a great deal. But those poor boys could neither ask him why he was laughing nor did he care to explain the reason for it.

After a few moments, the boys returned to their work.

Twelve

THROUGHOUT the month Soni had yearned for him and waited for him. But the wait, which seemed to burn like noonday, gradually began to mellow into the evening. And as the day crept towards its end, four letters came from him, but Amar Singh himself did not come. Then she lost hope and thought that he would not come. When the evening of that wait was beginning to grow darker, one day he suddenly appeared.

That was the second fortnight of *Vaishakh*. The heat was unbearable and after bathing the children in the courtyard, she was dressing up the elder daughter. She wore an old *salwar-kameez*, her hair uncombed. Amar Singh thought: the house too is like her, completely in disarray.

As he entered, the joy of coming home became half when he saw that sight. Even then, he picked up the younger daughter Mana whose hair was still wet and who was sucking her thumb. For a long time he played with the

child. His tiredness disappeared when he kissed her wet face. Standing at some distance from him and wearing a new frock, the elder daughter Ambi twisted her hair around her finger and cast her grudging, wide and shining eyes on her father. When Amar Singh saw her, he said, "Come, come my Amrita Shergil, you also come here." Saying this he lifted her and sat her on his right forearm, and thus laughing, and loving his two daughters, he continued his tittle-tattle.

...But what about Soni? When suddenly the thought came to him he was surprised to notice that she had left the place and had gone into the kitchen. Perhaps she was lighting the stove there. Carrying his daughters in his arms and talking and laughing with them, he walked into the kitchen. But when he saw Soni's face he was shocked. Her wet clothes and dishevelled hair disturbed him. He had never seen her so sad. But recovering soon, he said to her with a smile, "What's the matter madam, are you angry with this poor man?"

"Why should I be angry with this poor man?," Soni replied, but he had a feeling that her voice was a little too sharp, a little too sarcastic and harsh. She had not bothered even to look up at him; with her head bent she kept trying to light the stove.

"But look, how many mountains has this poor man crossed to come to serve your majesty, and you...?"

He did not complete the sentence and began to laugh loudly. Soni knew instantly that the laughter had not come out of his innocent heart; he was only pretending to be happy. (She herself too was only acting). She felt that not

saying anything then would not be proper.

"I am so happy that you came," she said, trying to keep her voice normal.

But after that, only the hissing sound of the stove broke the silence. (It happened despite the fact that Amar Singh had a perfunctory smile on his face and Soni was trying repeatedly to light the stove that kept going out again and again).

"This stove doesn't seem to work; just see, how much smoke is there in the kitchen!", he said, constantly batting his eyelids because of the acrid smoke and trying to make his two daughters laugh with his *ha-ha-he-he*. But Soni felt that he was neither able to stay in the kitchen, nor leave it.

After some time when it became impossible for him to stay in the kitchen, making his daughters his excuse he said, "Come, children, let's go out. Here the smoke brings tears in our eyes...come...come."

Carrying them in his arms, saying something to them in a loud voice and laughing he went out of the kitchen. As he came out of the kitchen, he turned and glanced at Soni: she was still bent over the stove.

He carried his daughters into his room and began to play with them. Then suddenly Soni heard him clapping and laughing loudly and she came out of the kitchen almost running to see what had happened. Finding nothing unusual, she returned from the room.

After some time when she brought the tea she found him lying on the bed and staring at the picture of a bear hanging on the wall. (The daughters had returned to the

other room and were playing with their toys). Putting the tea-tray on the small table, Soni picked it up and placed it near the divan, and quickly went out.

Amar Singh felt as if he could not breathe. Then suddenly he felt something rise in his stomach and move towards his head making him feel giddy. He did not know what was happening to him. He was all right just a moment ago. He sat up with a start. His turban which had loosened while playing with the children fell on the ground. His hair was all in a mess. Tying his hair into a knot, he poured tea into the cup. Watching the steam coming out of the kettle, he became thoughtful. Slowly pouring the tea into the cup, he sat there lost in thought. He picked up the cup and took a sip; then suddenly it occurred to him that he had forgotten to drink the glass of water kept on the tea-tray. He felt an unbearable burning sensation in his stomach.

"Soni!," he called, his eyes wide-open and also slightly blood-shot.

"Coming!," he heard her low voice from the other room but even after a long time she did not come. Finishing his cup of tea in two or three gulps, he again lay down on the divan.

When Soni finally came into the room he saw that she had dressed up the daughters in good clothes; but she herself had only arranged her hair with wet hands and had not changed her clothes either. For some time Amar Singh kept looking at her, but soon became his usual self, and his bluish-brown eyes seemed to dance.

"Madam, when I am thinking of becoming an Englishman, you choose to remain a rustic. Why, madam?"

Soni felt weak in her legs; Amar Singh continued to gaze at her face and began to smile.

"When I belong to a village, what else can I be?", Soni said, touching a lock of hair sticking to her forehead with her right hand.

"All right, madam, now please come here and sit down in front of me. Let me at least take a good look at you!" Amar Singh said and laughed in the same innocent manner, something that had once stolen away her heart. But today it had no effect on her. Her face continued to look like dried basil leaves. She slowly came forward and sat down obediently like a servant on the sofa.

"I said, madam," looking steadily at her face he said, "I am going to England...and in a few months, I will also call our daughters there...and their mom, 'our madam', too. We shall enjoy ourselves roaming about the big market-places and parks of London. You only have to be ready to go."

"Drink your tea first, it's getting cold," Soni did not give a straight answer to what he said. She only lowered her eyes (and they had become slightly moist also).

When Amar Singh picked up the younger daughter Mana and put her on his belly her foot accidentally hit the tea-cup. Some of the tea fell on the sheet on the divan. Hurriedly, Soni got up and began to clean the sheet, and then putting the cup on the tray she said, "Be a little more careful."

"Careful? I'll be careful only about our lovely daughters, not about this bedsheet. I can buy any number of such bedsheets. What do I care if one of them has been spoiled?"

Throwing the child up and down in his lap, and making her laugh, he began to talk about all kinds of things, and laughed as he usually did.

Soni had probably gone into the kitchen. She had left the room saying that some dog or cat had entered the courtyard, and she was going to drive it out; and after that, she never returned. In the room, Amar Singh continued to play with his two daughters, and to laugh a great deal, and calling Soni again and again but she only said, "I'm coming! Yes, I'm coming!", and pottered about the house from one room to another; but she did not return to Amar Singh's room.

TWO days and two nights had passed since he came but they neither talked freely nor were happy together, as they had been in the past. The excitement of going to England that had begun to dance like a bird in Amar Singh's mind, died as a small flicker is killed by a gust of cold wind. Till then Soni had not spoken a single word about going or not going to England. That is why on the third night he said to her with some irritation, "Now, tell me clearly, do you like or don't like my going to England?"

"Please do what you want, why do you have to ask me?"

Again, he got the same vague reply. He spent the night turning sleeplessly in his bed and the next day, before dawn, he began packing his bag. Soni brought tea for him, but he continued to do the packing. Occasionally he glanced at the teacup but did not take the tea, and it went cold. Soni

did not ask him to stay; nor did she ask him to finish his tea which was getting cold. He too did not say anything, and left like a stranger the way he had come—like an ‘outsider’.

Thirteen

AMAR Singh remained sad and silent for a number of days after he returned from home. He did not feel like working, nor could he decide about his future. While he was away, a number of letters from Mitthu had come. Mitthu informed him that he was looking for a decent job for him. (He himself had got a job, but did not tell him what it was). But Amar Singh's earlier enthusiasm seemed to have disappeared. (Now there was neither the flicker, nor the gust of wind; there was only the vacant and hazy sky).

After a few days, he began to convince himself with all kinds of arguments, the way one holds a child's finger and tries to help it walk slowly for a few steps. He told himself: What will you do in England? Didn't Baba Milkha say, 'My son, if your shop is doing well; why should you become a servant in some other place?' And indeed, if my business is doing well, why should I migrate to another country? Mitthu was single like a camel's tail so what did it matter

where he goes or where he lives; he has no children to wait for him at home? You are a family man; your situation is quite different. So, my brother, try to understand!

But man's mind is fickle. Baba Milha had told him, "My son, if a man has achieved control of his mind, he has conquered the world. The wise consider the mind to be like a monkey, or a fluttering flag, or the flame of a lamp. Have you ever seen any of these things steady? What to speak of yourself, no one in the world has ever seen them steady. Put a lamp inside the seventh room in the house where there is not even a puff of air; and still its flame will flicker. It's the same with a fluttering flag and a monkey."

For a few days he remained upset. Then putting 'here' and 'there' on the two pans of the scales he asked himself, "Which one is the heavier side?" The answer came, "The 'here' side is heavier." So it was settled. (Even then he had a nagging feeling that one of the pans already had some weight on it, or else 'here' and 'there' would perhaps have weighed the same.)

From that day, he began to concentrate on his work once again. By paying him twenty rupees more, he brought Sultan Akbar back from the place where he was working. He accepted all his conditions too. He began to deal with the old (that is, corrupt) friends of Mitthu and decided to follow all the 'techniques' of business that Mitthu had used. All that made his business grow. During that time he did not reply to any of Mitthu's letters. But whenever a letter came from him, he began to have doubts. At such moments he recited the line from the Gurbani again and again:

*Man loche buriaayian
Gur shabdin eh man hordiyе.**

In those days grandfather's teachings helped him a great deal. Whenever he was confused about what to do, he remembered Baba and prayed to him, "Save me, Baba" and Baba would indeed save him.

Then after some time, he became so busy in his work that all his worries, restlessness and doubt disappeared. Everyone began to talk about his 'artistic' hand. The other painters began to feel inadequate before him and thought of ways of thwarting his progress. But they could do no harm to him at all. There would often be new customers and the old ones became more loyal. (He felt that for the first time in his life sweet-talk and politeness had helped him greatly).

One day he wrote two letters—one to Mitthu and another to Soni. To Mitthu he wrote, "*Brother, now I belong to this place only. There is lot of work here—it is better even than England. If you come back, the two of us will create an England in this place.*" And to Soni he wrote in great detail about his plans for the future, in which two things stood out. The first was to construct what he called a cottage (actually, he meant a bungalow) which was as impressive as a glasshouse and which would take two to three years to complete. The second plan was to go in for an expansion of the shop. He ended the letter with these words:

* Our mind is always attracted to evil things. The only way to stop it is to follow the true and good words of the Guru; then only it will be protected from the temptation of evil.

I will handle only the work related to the market. All the work in the shop will be done by ten or fifteen student-painters. Then there will be so much work that I will need a manager. He will be responsible for everything. I'll have to take a very big shop in some other area; this place is too small for such a big business. I won't take a shop on rent; I'll rather buy one. I'll borrow a large sum from the bank. If it is not possible, Mitthu will send me the money. We can return that money to his family here.

And then he began to work so hard on his big plans that sometimes he was not able to write to Soni even for a month at a time. He did not even have the time for writing two sentences to say that he was all right. Acting on an impulse, sometimes he wrote to her that he was coming home. But how could he go? Here he did not have the time even to scratch his head.

And eventually his work and his new plans became the fetters that did not allow him to go home even for a day, though eight or ten months had passed. Sometimes he hated his helplessness, but the very next day, wearing blinkers on his eyes, he began to move round and round like an ox turning an oil press.

Fourteen

WHEN in the afternoon wearing a *bindi* as large as her iris, her neighbour Rita came to gossip, Soni asked her curiously, "Sister, that day you were saying something about Tirthram's wife; what happened to her?"

"The latest!" watching the entrance-door and running her tongue over her lips, Rita spoke as if she was relishing all that had happened, "Sister, do you think it's still a secret? I don't know how you missed it; but every day, that whore of a woman calls that stud to her house, and that too in the evening, and not only that...", lowering her voice she added, "I have heard that even her husband Tirthram knows about it. A number of times he has locked the doors of the house and has beaten her badly, but what can a poor man do when a whore like that is not ready to change her ways even after getting beaten? When she has decided to throw ash on the family's head, how can anyone stop her? You yourself know that no man will ever share all this with

others. What more can I say, you know everything."

And that night too Soni could not sleep. Till midnight there was no electricity, which did not let her sleep, and after that, she was troubled by such unsettling thoughts that she could not close her eyes till daybreak. When it was still dark, she heard the clattering sound of milk cans being carried by milkmen on their bicycles, and an unnamed fear began to fill her. She experienced something rising in her belly and sticking into her throat. Pushing her legs together, she drew up her feet and lay with her knees against her chest. When she tried to open her eyes she felt as if there were thorns in them, and that gaping courtyard looked like a monster clenching its jaws to eat her up. Last night, she had kept all the rooms and all the doors of the kitchen open, which made the house look vacant and deserted. A nameless fear made her whole body tremble, and she covered her face with folded arms.

A little before midday, calling his name a man entered Amar Singh's house. Without pausing at the entrance, he entered the house and sat down on the cot in the courtyard, as if it were his own house. He looked like a peasant. Dusting his shoes with a piece of cloth, and before Soni could say anything, he began to talk. Soni looked at him with some surprise.

"Beeba, I have brought a message from Phangan Singh asking you to come to the village as early as possible, first because his brother Rajo is very ill, and secondly because he wants to discuss with you the question of the boy's

marriage. And by the way, when will Amar Singh return, Beebajee?"

"How can I say *jee*, when he is working in another place?"

"Arre, I have heard that he was a teacher in some school."

"*Jee*, he was, but now he has his own business and is on a long leave from school."

"I see. But where does he live and what does he do for a living?"

"He has a shop in the city."

"That's good. Business, you know is always better; there is hardly anything in a job. Those who are doing a job, only look like gentlemen, but they hardly have any money. Haven't you heard the saying, *Gentleman de palle duyani, ghar mardi ai bhukhi janani*.^{*} Even otherwise too, our elders have considered working for someone as the lowest kind of work. Haven't you heard the saying—*uttam kheti, maddham bhupaar, nakhidda chakri, bheekh duaar*!"^{**}

And he went on like that. He talked continuously about Amar Singh's parents and relatives, about their past and about their future. Soni offered him water, then brought tea for him, and pretended to be interested in what he was

* These people are called gentlemen only because they dress up well, but they do not have even a two-anna coin in their pockets, and their wife and children are hungry at home.

** Farming is the best profession; business the second best, and being someone's servant is the worst, and, of course, a beggar after all is only a beggar going from door to door

saying by occasionally saying 'yes' to him and at the same time moving about the house doing her work. After a very long time when he got up to go, he took out two one-rupee notes from his pocket and gave one each to the girls.

"Take this with the blessings of your grandfather...and come to our village some time; we'll give you *bers* (a kind of berries) to eat, sugarcane to suck and green black-gram fresh from the field to eat, you will like it."

"No, *jee*, it's all right, please don't give them money," Soni protested.

"Silly girl, daughters belong to the whole village. Am I doing anything unusual? This Amar Singh is our son and these are our granddaughters. So how does it matter that you live in the town; after all you are family. The family remains family wherever it goes, to China or to any other place."

Soni could say nothing to that. She was growing impatient. After blessing the daughters, the farmer left. But before leaving, he once again asked her to come to the village as soon as possible.

After he went away, the stream of her thoughts seemed to change its course. The whole day she remained excited. Memories of people flooded her mind—she remembered her father-in-law, mother-in-law, brothers-in-law and sisters-in-law and many more people, and in her imagination she talked to them, flying to them without wings. Who can know what they said to her, or she to them?

And that evening itself Preetu also came quite unexpectedly. As he entered the house, he wished her *Sat Sri Akal* joining his palms together, and stood leaning

against the frame of the kitchen door. When she saw him Soni laughed openly, and Preetu was surprised to notice how white and beautiful her teeth were, how rose-like her face, and how shining her eyes. (He had never seen her so happy before). Then she took his hand into hers and led her to the cot and asked him to sit down.

“Why are you standing here by the wall, you look like an antelope trapped from some forest and tied to a post! Do sit down and relax; consider this as your own house.”

Preetu did not raise his eyes, nor did he smile the way he used to. His well-built, growing body seemed to shrink like a child's. But he could not get up from the place where Soni had seated him.

“Make yourself comfortable; if the cot is too hard, come here and sit in this chair,” Preetu felt as if flowers were dropping from Soni's mouth—she was like one of those princesses whose stories he had heard but whom he had never seen...only today he could form a vague idea of how they must have looked.

“Now tell me, what will you have, milk or tea? Milk you certainly drink, as children do, don't you?”

When she giggled again, Preetu lowered his eyes. At that moment the two girls playing in the street ran into the room and began to pull his arms calling “Preetu uncle! Preetu uncle!” Smiling shyly he began to talk to them.

Offering him a glass of tea made rich with a lot of milk, Soni said to him, “Milk will come in the evening; so now drink this thick milk-tea; later you will get milk also.”

Now, without any hesitation Preetu took the glass from her hand. Soni lovingly called her daughters to herself and

asked Preetu, "How did you find time to come to our house today?"

"I mean, I was..."

"What's this 'I was...' You must have come here after a month."

"No, it was just recently..."

And Preetu never knew when exactly he began to look straight into Soni's eyes and was deep into a conversation with her. And finally, the thing he said to her made her feel that he had come there only to tell her that.

"You know, Gurkeert Singh, the teacher, has asked me a number of times about Mana and Ambi, and about when master jee comes, and after how many days. He also asked me whether I come to your house or not. One day he also wanted to know about the people who live in your house and whether Maakhi is still here, or has gone back to the village...whenever he sees me, he asks me such questions."

"Then what do you say to him?" Soni asked with a smile, and Preetu felt that she was mocking at him. He lowered his eyes, and continued to look at the ground,

"What could I say? I only told him what I knew."

"What did you tell him?"

"Whatever I know."

"And what exactly do you know?"

Preetu lowered his eyes again and Soni burst out laughing. There was a light pink glow on her face and a shining redness in her eyes. Preetu raised his eyes to her face only once, and despite Soni's request, did not stay there any longer. He rose and left in a hurry.

And that night too Soni could not sleep. She was aware

of a growing restlessness; all kinds of thoughts crossed her mind and despite trying very hard, she could not remain calm.

The next day Amar Singh's 'four-word' letter came. He wrote, "I have dropped the idea of going to England. I will create an England for myself here itself. I have prepared all my schemes and have also written them down. I'll tell you the details when I come home."

She felt sad that the poor man did not realize that he had written all that in an earlier letter too; and now, if at all he came home and told her all his schemes, would he be the same man? Another month passed, the way months had passed earlier too. But there was no letter from him, neither any sign of him.

SONI and Rita now met more frequently. Women in the neighbourhood had all kinds of ideas when they saw them talking for hours together. Adding wings to the gossip, one neighbour Banto Suniari even floated the rumour that many unknown men visited Soni and Rita. (She could even tell their names and describe their faces, as if she knew each one of them personally, and had herself seen them coming there).

"Ram, Ram! This is indeed *Kaliyug*, sister," Banto said to anyone she met, "How low people have fallen? ...Now look, that poor man is not here, so what does he know about what is going on in his house? But when you come to think of it, it's his fault too: he is in the city, living like a blind man, and here, his house has caught fire. But who

will explain this to him and tell him, my dear man, the best thing for a cow, or a woman, is to be tethered to a post. Take the rope off their necks and God knows what places they roam in. Don't you notice this when a vagabond cow comes here? The moment they see the cow, four bulls will run after it. For that cow, they will fight and get their horns broken. You must certainly have seen it, haven't you? So this is what happens to vagabond cattle and also to a woman without a man!"

Rita had heard all that from someone, and was merely passing it on to Soni. On hearing that, Soni was silent, but she found it very difficult to remain composed. She made some excuse, requested Rita to leave, and then went into the kitchen and, feeling very disturbed, kept pottering about it.

Then it so happened that everything, good as well as evil, began to look the same to her. Gradually, she began to ignore everything. Earlier, she would often think of her honour and dignity, but now it sometimes occurred to her that those things were matters of the mind only. When something dies within, it seems as if everything else in the world had died with it. She thought: Now what was there to worry about...? When you have taken off all your clothes and have started dancing naked in the courtyard, does it really matter whether your face is covered with a veil or not...?

IN the evening when Gurkeert came, Soni told Maakhi "Take him to uncle's studio; I'm coming."

Then giving Maakhi a ten-rupee note, she asked him to bring some snacks from the market. Then she entered the room carrying a tray and said to Gurkeert with a smile, "You haven't left anything important to come here, have you? Are you in a hurry to go back?"

"Jee, there is always work, this hassle is just a part of life. Grandfather used to say—son, the work never ends; it is the man who is finished."

"Quite true!" she agreed and smiled.

When she lifted the tea-pot and poured tea into the cup, Gurkeert noticed her nail polish, which was bright and light coloured, and he thought he had never seen her wearing such bright nail polish. But he did not feel bold enough to ask her about it.

Then, as they were drinking tea, their eyes began to talk to each other, and there was no need for words. Meanwhile, Maakhi had gone to the other room with his cup of tea, where the children were playing. She called after him and said, "Maakhi, go to the kitchen and check whether the stove is still burning. Wash all the pots and pans lying there. I will have to clean them again if you don't do it properly."

When the two of them were alone in the room, Soni looked into Gurkeert's eyes and said, "Do come here whenever you have the time. After all, it's your friend's house."

"In fact a number of times I..." but he felt too timid to complete the sentence.

They had tea together and talked of many things. He felt that Soni was looking very happy. She was more open

with him now. (It had been many months since that incident and Soni seemed to have forgotten all about it).

When he was returning from her house, an unnamed fear gripped Gurkeert, and he found it difficult to turn his head and look at her house. He had a strange feeling, as if he were floating over the earth. Was all that he had seen and heard really true...? Yes, indeed it was. But how did all that happen? That he did not know.

And there in the house, Soni was filled with a strange turmoil, something that was quite unfamiliar. She wanted to run away to some other place, and sometimes she wanted to hide in some cave so that no one could know where she was. That feeling of uncertainty she had never experienced before. That was the reason why she closed the doors of 'his room', drew the curtains on the windows opening on the street, and falling face down on the divan hid her face in her arms. And then she began to weep so bitterly that she had to stifle her sobs against the pillow.

NOW, whenever he had the time, Gurkeert came as if it were his 'own' house. When he came, he brought sweets, fruit and toys for the children. Preetu or Maakhi made tea for him and while having tea with Gurkeert, Soni sometimes laughed and sometimes grew serious and talked to him about God knows what strange things. Sometimes they also played cards. As they did in the past, Maakhi and Preetu did not find anything unusual in it. They had come to know that early in the morning Soni bathed, put on fine clothes and got ready. Several women in the neighbourhood

had stopped coming to their house. Only Rita, whenever she had the time, came and talked to her for hours. (And with her too, no woman of the neighbourhood was very friendly). Everyday, Rita brought such 'news' that made Soni feel that she was wrong in thinking that things that happened in the city did not happen in small towns. (Sometimes it seemed to her that it happened in every house. The only difference was that Rita knew all those stories, which she, sitting at home, did not know).

WHEN Amar Singh's letter came after a long gap, Soni merely skimmed through it just to see whether it said anything about his coming. The letter was silent about it. She threw it in the open cupboard, but at night, she felt very disturbed at bed-time. Unable to sleep, she rose from the bed and came out into the courtyard. It was a lovely *Kartik* night, pleasant and not very cold. Summer had ended a month back. The moon was up in the sky, and looked like a piece of unbuttered *roti* of *baajri* which had been cut into a piece that was slightly bigger than half. It had paused above the parapet of the neighbours' houses. A patch of grayish-brown cloud was rising slowly on the left side of the moon. Only a moment ago it had a different shape. Now it looked like a pug-nosed bulldog. (She had always been scared of such dogs). But as she watched the patch of cloud, it began to change into a bear that the bear-man took from street to street. The bear man ordered the bear to stand on its two hind legs and dance, and the animal moved its right leg up and down as if it were moving the

handle of a spinning wheel; its left leg was raised as if it held the cotton...

She was still watching that patch of cloud changing its shape when she felt a puff of cold wind and a shiver went through her body. But the very next moment, she felt as if her whole body was burning. There was fire in her eyes and in her shoulders, and breasts, and arms and thighs; and she felt as if her entire body was on fire. One last time, she looked up at the moon hanging slightly above the parapet and then, her eyes travelled to that patch of cloud that had now shrunk into the shape of a cat ready to pounce; and then taking long strides, she came into the house.

Green light filled the room. Swiftly she took off her chunni and put it on the hanger. She saw that her two daughters were sleeping. She lay down on the other bed and pulled over her a light silken quilt. She felt very cold and so pressing her legs together, she drew them up to her chest and held them tightly in her arms. But the shivering still increased. Mana, sleeping on the other bed, turned and said something in her sleep. The blanket slipped from her body and her legs were exposed. She got up quickly, put the blanket over her and once again, folded herself in the quilt. She also covered her head with it.

But only a little while later she felt that she could not breathe because of the quilt on her face. Removing it from her face she began to watch the roof, the walls and everything else in the room, as though trying to recognize them. (She could not even tell which of her chunnis was on the hanger). Taking her arms away from her legs, she

pushed her hands together between her knees but they remain cold as if they had been placed in ice. She remained bundled up like that but neither the shivering stopped, nor could she sleep even for a moment. She kept staring at things in the room, sometimes at the children's toys in the open cupboard, and sometimes at the paintings hanging on the wall. The faces in those paintings looked strange and terrifying.

It must have been half past twelve or one when she heard dogs barking in the street. And then she heard the sound of fingers tapping on the outer door. Gradually the tapping became louder and her heart began to beat faster. When the tapping became louder still, she pressed her hands between her shivering legs as before, and covered her face with the quilt. For a few moments her heart continued to race faster and faster and then it stopped as if her whole body had become a dry branch of a tree, which would not feel any pain, even if it was cut.

When the tapping grew louder she felt a mounting desire to weep. Tears, hot as fire, spilled from her eyes. First she sobbed and snuffled, and then pushed the corner of the quilt into her mouth, but the fire-like tears did not stop nor did her sobs.

After a while she felt suffocated and threw the quilt away from her face. She looked out into the courtyard through the window-glass and found that it was still dark. The hissing night covered the house like a storm. The moon, seen some time back, was not visible, nor was there the white and gray patch of cloud. She had never gone through such a terrifying night before. But because of the

fear or frustration within her, she could not move a limb, not even her little finger. Then she did not know when sleep came; she just lost consciousness of everything.

She heard Maakhi calling her. She woke up with a start and heard something like, "Aunty, shall I bring tea there? I had my tea a long time back. It's very late; the milkman came and left a long time ago."

"Heat the water, I'll be there in a minute," she replied arranging her hair, but since Maakhi had returned from the door itself she could not see him.

Getting up slowly from the bed, she picked up her chunni from the hanger and casting a glance at her sleeping daughters went into the kitchen. There she saw Maakhi heating water. She went into the adjacent room and stood before the mirror. Her face had never looked so haggard; it seemed to be someone else's. There were black spots under her eyes; she could even see a few wrinkles there. The whole face looked dry and colourless; its earlier softness seemed to have disappeared. When she looked at the back of her hands she found blue veins showing on them. The skin on the finger joints looked dry and wrinkled.... Suddenly she felt that if she stood there for even a second more, she would collapse. She moved backwards taking slow deliberate steps and sat down on the divan. She was breathing hard, as if she had been running for miles.

"Maakhi, my son, bring my tea here...!"

And then she closed her eyes and once again her body felt lifeless. She lay down on the divan.

Fifteen

“GOD knows how long I have been looking for you, master. In which forest were you hiding? No one told me that here in one corner of the city our younger brother is painting picture after picture,” entering the room Raju said as if complaining.

Amar Singh had been longing for a ‘customer’. When he saw Raju, he bloomed like a flower. He politely offered him a chair and sent a boy to bring some tea. He asked Raju after his family and children. But Raju seemed to be in a hurry. Only saying ‘all right, all right’ in reply to his questions, he quickly came to the point.

“Come, let’s go out somewhere in the open. In the ‘fragrance’ of this place, what I have to say will be lost.” He spoke ‘fragrance’ in a tone as if he meant ‘stench’. Taking Amar Singh with him, he went to a mango tree at some distance and the two sat in its shade.

"And how is work?" Raju asked only to begin the conversation.

"By your good wishes, it's excellent," Amar Singh said with a smile, "Now in a day or two I am going to buy a plot for a house, which will be registered in my name, and then my whole family will live here together. This is a very nice city."

'Oho! So you like this city?" Raju asked, "No doubt you are educated and wise, and you also look better than I do, but let me tell you, you are too simple for these times...you seem to belong to some older period of holy people!"

When he heard that, Amar Singh smiled. (It seemed as if he was enjoying the nice things Raju was saying about him). He was thoughtful for a moment and then said, "You know well that I am not a crafty man. I only believe that the Almighty takes care of everyone—he is the protector of all."

"That's why I say that these are not the times for simple souls like you. You are one of those who first allow their houses to be looted and then end up crying. You know the saying: what's the use of weeping when birds have eaten the seeds in your field." Amar Singh could feel the note of sarcasm in Raju's voice and suddenly he looked at his deep-set small eyes and the small unkempt beard, but could not really understand what Raju was hinting at.

"The fact is, master," speaking in a low and steady voice Raju said, "Here you are dreaming about bungalows and palaces; and there people are capturing your house...! Look, we are old friends, and that is why when I could

stand it no longer, I came to you. Now, tell me one thing, have you ever thought of your family or how they are doing there...? It's all right for you to earn well in this place, if fact, it is not a bad thing to do so. People go to places like China and Burma to earn money. You are only two hundred miles away from your home. But have you ever thought how that single woman is coping alone with the problems of the house...? Do not think that I have come here to sow seeds of discord in your family; but while there is still time, you should open your eyes and find out who in your absence is digging a hole through the wall of your house. Listen to me! Think what is happening around you. Work is important for everyone, but it is also a man's duty to look after his family... No one ever neglects his family honour like you and makes the excuse that he has to earn money. What can a man hold if his fist is not closed? Please do not misunderstand me. Truth is always bitter, and you should know it..."

Raju remained silent for some time, and Amar Singh bent his head, and with a twig played with the pebbles there. Only God knows what thoughts were crossing his mind. But after some time Raju stood up as if in a hurry and said, "That's all I came to say to you, now it is for you to think about it."

When Raju began to walk towards the road taking long strides, Amar Singh called after him asking him to wait for him, but he did not stop.

"You came to see me; but I did not offer you anything...", catching up with him and speaking to him in a low and sad voice, Amar Singh could say only that when

Raju almost flared up:

"I have seen what you have to offer! Now don't ignore my words, the way the son-in-law of the *behra* wastes his 'touching of feet' on the dogs. I tell you, pay attention to my words or else you will have to repent all your life."

Amar Singh wished the earth to open and to devour him. When he looked at the back of Raju he felt that some monster was returning after eating up everything he had. He thought about it again and again and had the idea that perhaps Raju had come to him to settle some old score by misleading him. But he never had an enemy; and Raju was his old friend, then why would he do it? But Raju's words kept weighing down on his heart. Amar Singh felt as if his whole body had become clay.

Instead of going to the shop, he went home. When he could think of nothing else he sat down to write a letter to his old friend Sadhe tailor. He wrote the letter a number of times and then tore it. He did not know how to write that letter. When, after some time he was able to overcome his confusion to some extent, he wrote the letter, which had three sentences only.

Dear Friend Sadha Singh,

Sat Sri Akal,

I hope you and your family are well. If you could write to me how my children are doing, I shall be very grateful to you.

*Your brother,
Amar Singh 'Anbhol'*

After he wrote the letter he spent the week in great anguish. Seven or eight days later, he received an old, frayed postcard. It was written in such illegible hand that he could read it with great difficulty. It went like this:

This letter is written by Sadha Singh. Further, my noble master Amar Singh Anbhol jee, I greet you in the name of the Guru. And further, the news is that I have received your letter, jee. But your family is not in a good condition. Your wife is no longer what she used to be; many men visit her. I feel very embarrassed writing all this to you, jee. With joined palms I pray to you, because here all of us are feeling humiliated. Therefore, you either take your family with you; or come here and look after it, jee. All else is well. Let my greetings reach those who read or hear this letter. Your humble servant Sadha Singh.

Amar Singh felt dazed. Not once, but many times he read that sentence about men visiting his wife and when he found it difficult to sit in the chair, he came into the room and lay down on the cot.

When the evening fell he got up from the cot and went up to the rooftop. He told Mittu that he would not have his dinner. Till midnight he kept staring at the blue sky—the twinkling stars, the moon in the east looking like an egg, cut into slightly more than half—all that was visible and yet he could see nothing. At times he felt that the beautiful face of Soni was painted on the moon, but the face had as many dark spots on it as there are on the moon. He could not see the rest of her body below her face. Only a beheaded face could be seen there. Glimmering far into

the distance, the street lights of the city could be seen, but as in the past, the lights did not appear to wash the blue-black sky aglow. It appeared to him that the light was hiding behind the windows in the houses there, and had become one with the darkness, or, as if the darkness of those strange skylights, windows and doors had eaten up the light. Why was it like that? Was it only because of the mental state he was in? He thought about it again and again but could not unravel that mystery.

Half the night must have gone when even in the chill of *Phagun* he felt very thirsty. He came downstairs. The room close to the kitchen was dark. (Earlier it was Mitthu's bedroom; now Mittu Miyan slept there). He switched on the red light of his room so that Mittu was not disturbed. In that light nothing in the room was clearly visible. Gradually, some of the shapes became clear, and he felt that his throat had gone dry. Then he remembered that he had come down to drink water. Tiptoeing into the kitchen he drank two or three glasses of water and began to sweat even in that cold weather. When he came out of the kitchen he paused for some time, and then as if he had remembered something, once again went into his room. His eyes fell on some old newspapers and magazines lying under the large cupboard. Absent-mindedly he began to turn the pages of the papers in that pile and then he picked up a heavy-looking English magazine and opened it. An inland envelope slipped out of it and fell on the ground. He threw down the magazine and taking a pen from his small table began to write a letter, as if he wanted to post it that night itself to be sent through the night mail.

Dear Friend Mitthu,

I am coming to you within a week; please arrange some work for me. We will live together.

But after that he did not know what else to write. Crushing the letter in his left hand, he came out into the veranda. Leaving the main door ajar, he began to walk towards the main road. (That road went to some village nearby). He continued to walk on the road with his head bent and suddenly felt that the letter in his left hand had become wet with sweat. He paused near a tree and began to examine it. Then slowly and very deliberately, he tore it into two, then four, then eight and then sixteen pieces. He thought that some words still remained to be torn. Taking three or four pieces of paper at a time, he tore them into still smaller pieces and held them in both his fists. Then he moved ahead, dropping the pieces on the black road.

Suddenly he felt panicky and when he brought his hands close to his eyes, he noticed that they were empty. Only one or two pieces of paper stuck to his wet palms. He rubbed his hands vigorously against the sides of his trousers and got rid of the pieces. And then, closing his hands into fists as before, he continued to walk. He did not look back but had a vague feeling that the 'incomplete' city was left far behind. In the west, the moon too began to sink; because of which his shadow, walking along with him, began to lengthen. He paused and looked ahead: in the distance he could see the small and big mud houses and brick buildings of the village. Then he heard a large number of dogs barking together and stopped where he was.

...In front of him lay the main road that had become narrower to join the street leading to the village. There was a cluster of *keekar* trees along the road that almost hid it. The road went under the trees to join the village street, which appeared to devour it as if it were the kids of some goat...

At that moment he heard a big noise coming from the village. It seemed to him as if everyone in the village had woken up and was hitting hard with spears, lances, swords and sticks the head of an advancing python ...but the python continued to advance... it moved forward devouring all houses, cattle, and children. No weapon had any effect on it.

Amar Singh's entire body began to shake with fear. He turned back from there and putting his hands behind him, closed them into fists. It seemed as if he was stamping on the python with his feet. Whenever he stepped on the snake, his feet seemed to slip. He closed his fists still harder. There were no more pieces of paper in his fists, but only sand....The harder he closed his fists, the faster the sand slipped out between his fingers; his fists had begun to become empty.

Then, trembling with fear as before, and bringing his hands very close to his eyes he looked at them—his palms were covered with blood. His nails had gone so deep into the flesh of his palms that his sweat had acquired the smell of blood. When he could not look at his hands any more, he put them behind his back as before, and with his fists closed and his head bent he began to walk again. He felt that he was walking on the tail of the python. He looked

up, and saw that the tail spread before him interminably. In the 'dark' habitations of the city, he saw not one but hundreds of pythons crawling. A very long and horrible-looking python had reached his house...but its tail was still stuck in some shop, in some office of this city. And he was not able to see where the tail was.

He paused again to look at his palms. He could not see them clearly in the dark. But he felt as if the left palm was full of blood and sweat and in the right palm there was the sand from the heap that lay in the north of his old village. When closing his palms, he put them behind his back and with his body bent continued to walk, still he could not take his mind off his fists.

Home was still far away—two hundred miles or one hundred and fifty *kos*. But all the sand had begun to fall slowly from his right fist. The harder he closed his fist, the more rapidly did the sand slip through his fingers!

When he was still far away from home, he noticed that there was not a single grain of sand left in his right fist, but the stench of blood and sweat coming from his left fist had grown so strong that he found it difficult to breathe.

...Pausing for a few moments, he began to walk again. But God knows how far his home was that he could not even see it. He continued to walk, and did not know even this—was his home really in that city?

Glossary

<i>Amma:</i>	mother.
<i>Apsara:</i>	<i>Apsara</i> is the name given to any of the celestial dancers in the court of Indra, who is the king of gods in the Hindu pantheon.
<i>Arre:</i>	an interjection roughly meaning 'O you!'. Sometimes it can also mean 'See!'.
<i>Bajri:</i>	millet.
<i>Behra:</i>	In Punjab, <i>behra</i> is that part of the village where the houses of the depressed castes are located.
<i>Bhog:</i>	a part of the funeral rites.
<i>Bibi jee:</i>	a term of address to a woman, showing respect.
<i>Bidi:</i>	a small, Indian cigarette made by rolling tobacco into a dry leaf of the kendu/tendu tree.
<i>Bindi:</i>	a round, red mark that Indian women wear on their forehead as an ornament.
<i>Chakori:</i>	a bird. In Indian folk tales it is often

	described as a bird that loves the moon so much that it constantly gazes at it, and sometimes faints doing so.
<i>Chir-chir:</i>	sound a monkey makes.
<i>Dal:</i>	lentils cooked in water.
<i>Darwaza:</i>	in Punjab, <i>darwaza</i> means a veranda, crossing which one can enter the house. Here farmers tether their cattle. It is very big and is also used as a sitting room for the visitors.
<i>Gidda:</i>	a popular folk dance performed by women in Punjab.
<i>Gotra:</i>	a clan among Hindus that is named after a single ancestor; or after a teacher, whose students the members of that clan were, in very ancient times.
<i>Hai, hai:</i>	expression of surprise and shock.
<i>Indra:</i>	the king of gods in the Hindu pantheon, famed to have a grand court where beautiful celestial maidens (<i>apsaras</i>) danced.
<i>Jee:</i>	an expression indicating respect for the person being addressed to. It can also mean 'Yes Sir or Madam'. When appended to a name it indicates respect for the person mentioned.
<i>Kaliyug:</i>	Hindus divide time into aeons, the last of which is <i>Kaliyug</i> (the present time), a period of decline and loss of values.
<i>Kartik:</i>	a month in Hindu calendar corresponding roughly to October.
<i>Kimkhab:</i>	a very fine silky cloth. It is a Persian word.
<i>Kos:</i>	an Indian measure of distance, equal to roughly two miles.
<i>Lakh:</i>	one <i>lakh</i> equals a hundred thousand.

Mamu:	uncle, mother's brother.
Maya:	in Hindu philosophy, it means illusion. The term is also used for worldly possessions, including money.
Parbrahma:	the Supreme Being.
Peepal:	a large, big tree with heart-shaped shiny leaves. It may be a few centuries old.
Phagun:	a month in the Hindu calendar corresponding roughly to February.
Roti:	unleavened Indian bread.
Sadhu:	a wandering mendicant.
Salam:	greetings.
Sat Sri Akal! :	the common greeting among Sikhs.
Sawan:	a month in the Indian calendar coinciding with the rainy season.
Shraddha season:	A particular period in the year when the dead ancestors are remembered.
Teej:	an Indian festival of women, celebrated during the rainy season.
tir-tir :	the popping sound made by corn being roasted.
Toofan Mail:	name of a train in India.
Ustad:	a teacher or a mentor.
Vaidya or vaidyaraj:	a doctor who practises Indian medicine.
Vaishakh:	a month in the Hindu calendar, corresponding roughly to April- May.
Vidur:	a saintly character in the <i>Mahabharata</i> . Lord Krishna refused Prince Duryodhan's invitation and had a meal of ordinary greens at Vidur's house.

The young artist Amar Singh runs from one city to another in search of a rather undefined and vague 'success' in life and in the process isolates himself from his wife Soni, his children, his home and hearth. In this famous Punjabi novel titled *Ret Ki Ek Muthi*, now being made available by the Trust in English translation under its Aadan Pradan Series, the master storyteller Gurdial Singh explores the subtle nuances of human desires and relationships which make human beings seek happiness without realising what it amounts to.

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